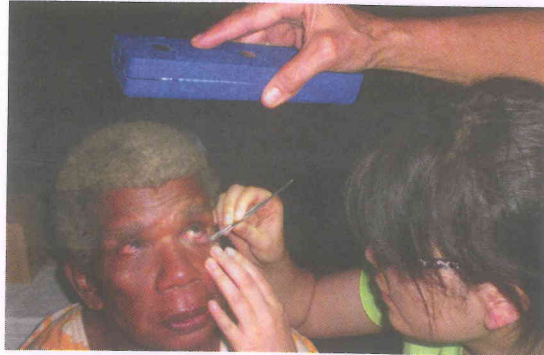


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## Visionary mission

By *Deb Bennett*

**WHEN** Don and Meg MacRaild visited Vanuatu in 1994, they had no idea of the impact the brief visit would have not only on their lives, but the lives of thousands of people throughout the islands.

For Mrs MacRaild, the visit was something of a homecoming. The daughter of missionary Rev Charles Macleod, Mrs MacRaild was born on the island of Tanna. She and her husband were guests of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, who were holding their first national Assembly on the island since Mrs MacRaild's father had worked there back in the 1940s and '50s.

Reflecting on his first trip to Vanuatu, Mr MacRaild explains how a friendship brought about a series of events that lead to the development of UnitingWorld's Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project (VBP).

"While we were there, we were befriended by the paramount chief of the island of Tanna, who is like royalty to his 40,000 subjects," Mr MacRaild said.

"When we got back to Australia, he wrote to me asking for a pair of glasses to suit a 72-year-old. I was a teacher at the time, I had no knowledge of anything to do with eye-care, but it was

something I discussed with my local optometrist, who I happened to have an appointment with a few days after receiving the letter."

The optometrist promised to give Mr MacRaild some second-hand glasses to take with him on his next trip to Vanuatu and offered to provide basic lessons on how to test eyes.

"I told him that we had no plans to go back, but he said to me that he had a feeling I would return to Vanuatu," Mr MacRaild said.

"Well, in 1998, we were invited to go again. We gave away 500 pairs of second-hand glasses given to us by the optometrist."

On this second trip to Vanuatu, the MacRailds saw the impact preventable eye disease was having on the local communities.

Similar to many developing countries, eye-care in Vanuatu is often neglected. Untreated eye trauma and the effects of diabetes due to a poor diet can lead to blindness and vision impairment that, if treated early enough, need not occur. The archipelago's population of 200,000 is scattered throughout 83 volcanic islands, making isolation a contributing factor as many of the smaller islands and villages are inaccessible by road.

"We knew roughly what their prescriptions were for and did very basic testing, but it was very rough. Also, sometimes when you're dealing with illiterate people, they believe that glasses will teach them to read. It's very hard to tell them that it's not appropriate to take a 'near enough' set of glasses.

"I came back to Australia and felt we really hadn't been of much use."

It was during this trip that the extent of the eye-care problem in Vanuatu became apparent to the MacRailds.

After returning to Australia, the couple was invited to teach in Vanuatu. Before they left, Mr MacRaild spoke at a Rotary function about the impact preventable eye-disease was having on communities in Vanuatu. The Sale Rotary Club offered to help fund an optometrist to travel to Vanuatu.

An ad was placed in an optometry journal and Rotary was overwhelmed with the response. Not only was the service

organisation surprised by the number of people applying, the calibre of applicants made it difficult to choose. In the end, Rotary decided to send three volunteers, two with PhDs from Melbourne University and one qualified in optometry and pharmacy. In 2000, the VPB program was born.

"In that first year Meg and I were teaching in a church school," Mr MacRaild said.

"It was clear the best network in Vanuatu was the Presbyterian Church. We organised the team and travelled with them and along the way picked up a lot of information about how things should be done."

Rotary, although keen to support the project, no longer had the funds. Then, as Mr MacRaild explains, he received a phone call "out of the blue" from Laurie Fitzgerald from Uniting Church Overseas Aid (now known as UnitingWorld).

"To this day, Laurie says he has no idea how he heard about what we had been doing," Mr MacRaild said.

"It was just one of those opportune situations. Laurie had some money that was sitting there and had heard about us. He asked if we needed some help running the program, and I told him the program wouldn't run without money. He said 'Would \$10,000 make it run?'"

"So it ran. It's been growing ever since and the Uniting Church has been the mainstay behind it. We now see more than 4000 patients a year through the work of visiting teams. In addition more than 2000 others are seen by the local staff that the project has trained and now supply full time employment to."

Mr MacRaild stresses that the project, although initiated by him, has developed into a team effort. With the support of his local Uniting Church congregation at Stratford, plus many other Church congregations and Rotary clubs, donated second hand glasses are collected, tested and graded by members of the Sale Central Rotary Club before being taken to Vanuatu. Rotary organisation ROMAC also funds surgical interventions for children.

The MacRailds normally travel to Vanuatu to oversee the teams when they arrive and accompany them to the outlying villages. As Mr MacRaild explains, volunteering is not for the faint-hearted.

"It's very hard once you get out of the major centres," he said. "You can fly into some of the little jungle airstrips, but after that it's either the back of a





Adison Tule prior to surgery.

truck or walk. Some of the villages we work in are five or six hours walk from the nearest road or airstrip. Some of the teams have to travel in small boats to get to the most remote communities, others will even travel in dugout canoes."

Bryan Cussen is the Pacific programs coordinator for UnitingWorld. He explained that the project has developed to the extent that it now runs eye-care clinics in Port Vila, Santo and Tanna where patients' eyes are tested and prescription glasses made. This means outreach teams can concentrate on the more remote locations throughout Vanuatu that wouldn't normally have access to eye-care.

"Usually four teams visit remote regions each year," Mr Cussen said.

"Each team includes two optometrists, one doctor, one nurse, one health educator and two support staff. One or two members of the team will be Ni-Vanuatu health-care workers, who receive training and mentoring. Teams visit about 40 villages in an eight to 12 week period, during which time they will assist approximately 3500 people."

As well as providing much needed eyecare, medical teams also offer advice on issues such as basic health care, nutritional information, substance abuse and disease control.

Women in Vanuatu tend to die at a younger age than men, often because of respiratory problems due to smokey cooking conditions. The teams promote the production of mud brick, smoke-free stoves and provide plans and instructions on how to use them.

While the numbers of people helped by the project is impressive, it is perhaps the personal stories that show the true impact of the work performed.

"Adison Tule is a young boy from Vatrata Village on the island of Vanua Lava," Mr Cussen said.

"He had an encephalocele (a condition where the brain protrudes through a gap in the skull) into the eye sockets. Without



Meg and Don MacRaid with Adison Tule, his father Silas and his mother Magdelane, a year after successful surgery.

our intervention, he would have died before reaching adulthood and, because his sight was so poor, he would not have been able to have any meaningful education in the village. His physical appearance also led to rejection by the other children.

"He was brought to Melbourne for major surgery. Now he is back home, in school, has no visible deformity and can look forward to a similar life to his peers."

For more information on the Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project see UnitingWorld's website at <http://www.unitingworld.org.au/1-for-6/restore-sight-vanuatu/> or contact Don MacRaid: [dmacrauld@hotmail.com](mailto:dmacrauld@hotmail.com)

# Sailing for sight

**MEDICAL** Sailing Ministries began as something of a pipe dream back in 2004. Brothers Andrew and Robert Latimer had always shared an interest in sailing, but when Robert read an article in a yachting magazine about medical personnel sailing to remote locations in Vanuatu, the seeds of an idea were planted.

As Robert explained, the idea might have been dismissed were it not for a series of coincidences that kept the dream alive.

"Wherever I turned it seemed the topic of Vanuatu was not far away," he said. "The doctors I met who were regular volunteers to Vanuatu, the 'yachty' who'd just sailed there, further articles I stumbled upon and friends who'd been on holidays there."

Then in 2008, after years of what he describes as 'tyre kicking' the dream became a reality when the Latimer brothers bought Chimere – a 53-foot steel yacht. With the support of his congregation at North

Ringwood Uniting Church, Medical Sailing Ministries (MSM) was formed.

"The idea was simple enough,"

Robert said. "Sail a yacht to Vanuatu with the purpose of providing transport among the remote outer islands for medical volunteers from the VPB project."

Throughout 2009 and 2010, more than 30 volunteer sailors offered their time and skills, ensuring a working crew of six aboard at all times throughout a total of eight months at sea and in the field.

Carl Suddaby read about MSM in a boating magazine. The manager of a boat repair business in Hervey Bay said he brought to the mission professional skills and a personal motivation.

"I'm a qualified diesel mechanic but most of my background has centred around the sea," Mr Suddaby said.

"For 15 years I was a commercial fishing boat skipper, plus I had a four year period in the ambulance service.

"My wife and I visited Vanuatu and were very taken with the people, I suppose I was looking for ways to go back and help in some way.



+ Chimere finally clears Sydney heads, May 2009 and sails straight into a thunderstorm



MSM Volunteers, Port Resolution Tanna, looking "worst for wear".  
(L-R) Scott Hamilton, Bill Vrijens, Bob Brenac, Rob Latimer & Tony Burke.



"The MSM article struck a chord with me also as the work centres around eyecare. My youngest daughter was born with a cataract in one eye and was very lucky not to have it in both eyes. So I suppose this drove me to apply."

Robert said that in spite of the diverse backgrounds of the crew, they all described the experience as 'life changing'.

"The remoteness and lack of facilities in most villages in no way diminished the friendly, generous and appreciative welcome we experienced everywhere," he said.

Chimere is now berthed in Melbourne, with 2011 being declared a year of maintenance and recess in home waters. Robert is keen to undertake more work on an 'as needed' basis with VPB, however, his brother Andrew needs to sell his half of the boat.

"A key to the continuation of MSM's work will be

whether a new owner, (or group of owners), can be found," Robert said.

"It's a chance for anyone who's dreamed of owning a boat and sailing the South Pacific – while at the same time doing some good in the world – to do what we did and make the dream a reality."

For more information go to: [www.msm.org.au](http://www.msm.org.au) or call Robert Latimer on 0428 370579



Loading gear on and off the deck became a pretty slick affair. (Pt Resolution, Tanna)