

Victorian Catholic primary school teachers to share Solomon Islands experience in Rome

Primary school teachers Eilish Flagg and Katie Rawet should have crossed paths as students in the same teaching degree at Australian Catholic University (ACU). Instead, the two Victorians met in a remote village in the South Pacific with no electricity, running water, or roads.

During the third year of university, Eilish and Katie signed up to ACU's Solomon Islands Teacher Education Immersion program. The program offers ACU education students the unique opportunity to teach in a remote village in Savo Island for four weeks.

"We lived within the villages and the communities, and we had no running water, no electricity, no cars, no roads," Katie, a prep teacher at St John Bosco's Primary School, Niddrie, said.

"It was quite an immersive experience to live in the village and experience how they lived as well. It exposed us to different aspects of their culture that we would not have experienced otherwise."

For Eilish, who works at St Mary's Catholic Primary School in Warracknabeal, the biggest lesson she learned in the Solomon Islands was the importance of gratitude.

"There were no shops on the island we were on, so in the village you had to use whatever you had," she said.

"The school also had very, very little resources and yet the students were so grateful for whatever learning experience they had.

"I use that a lot as a teacher now, where I try to tell the children in my class that we don't need the biggest and best things to achieve the same goal."

The pair, who are now studying a Master of Education specialising in Allied School Psychology at ACU Melbourne, continue to support the Solomon Islands immersion program, including returning to Savo Island at least once since they completed the program.

"I loved it so much I actually named my dog Savo," Eilish said.

This week the two Catholic primary school teachers will share their experiences to a global audience in Rome. The pair have been selected to represent ACU at the Uniservitate III Global Symposium. Pope Francis is expected to greet and bless the delegates of the symposium on October 26.

ACU and its Rome campus are official collaborators in the symposium, which will bring together leaders, educators, and students from around the world to promote service-learning within Catholic higher education institutions.

Katie said one of the highlights of her teaching studies at ACU was the opportunity to teach in a different country.

"I've been lucky enough to teach overseas twice before, once in Cambodia through ACU as well, and the one piece of advice that I give pre-service teachers...is to push yourself out of your comfort zone because that's where you learn best," Katie said.

ACU Ballarat Associate Professor Mellita Jones, one of the leaders of the Solomon Islands immersion program, said more than 200 students have gone through the program since its inception in 2009, with Katie and Eilish among those who have given back the most since graduating.

"From preparation meetings with other students year after year, to coming back to the Solomon Islands and supporting us with fundraising, they are just constantly giving of themselves in lots of different ways to the program and that's why they were selected to go to the Global Symposium," Dr Jones said.

Dr Jones is now preparing to lead a group of 20 students to Solomon Islands for the 2022 immersion program.

"Our research shows that the Solomon Islands immersion program impacts pre-service teachers in profound ways, with many of them making substantial changes to their own lives on return to Australia, for example, being less consumer-driven and more family focused, and even teaching about equity and access issues and opportunities to Australian children once they graduate," Dr Jones said.

The ACU Solomon Islands Teacher Education Immersion program was named joint winner of the 2022 Uniservitate Award (Asia and Oceania Hub) in September.

Regarding the upcoming Symposium, Dr Matthew Pink, Associate Director, ACU Engagement said: "The symposium is a great opportunity to connect with and learn from service-learning practitioners in Catholic Higher Education and a marvellous activation of our Rome campus through networking events, meetings, and providing accommodation for an international group of delegates."

Eilish Flagg, Katie Rawet and Dr Matthew Pink are available for virtual interviews while in Rome for the III Global Symposium (October 27 to 28) or in-person upon return to Australia.

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