



Uplift Project:

Report of Fiji Distribution, Dec 2013.

By Naomi Roberts, March 2014.

My apologies for the tardiness of this report as the first quarter of this year flew straight past me while I was still contemplating and collating information to start this report. Our Fiji December distribution was by far our biggest and had some of the more difficult location to access. With our busy lives and not a lot of time for reading, I'm sorry for the lengthy report, it somehow had turned into a short story! Hope you'll enjoy reading through it as much as we enjoyed being a part of it.

VANUATU

Before Fiji, my first stop was Vanuatu to deliver sports bras to Vanuatu's Elite women athletes. Vanuatu Sports Association, (through the Vanuatu Volleyball President and also was my Northern Territory team mate for 2 a side beach volleyball 15 years ago!!) was involved at running an Elite Women's Sports Health Workshop and requested if I could help in supplying some sports bras and also talk about the importance of wearing the correct sports bra. This request came at the same day that I had received confirmation from Pacific Brands. The donation to Vanuatu was made possible by Katie Wilson from Pacific Brands. We were able to deliver 600 new Berlei Sports Bras to over 100 athletes. I was fortunate to have Oxfam in Vanuatu paid for my airfare to Vanuatu then on to Fiji. Vanuatu Airlines waved my 60kg of extras baggage as their sponsorship for women's athlete. Being an ex elite athlete I knew from experience the importance of wearing the correct sports bra so armed with these great bras and my AIS print out from the below link, I was ready to talk and fit out these fortunate athletes.

http://www.ausport.gov.au/sportscoachmag/sports_sciences/berlei_sports_bras_-_first_round_of_tests_released

The Berlei bras were being eagerly anticipated and well received by the grateful athletes. The workshop was over 2 days and I got to fit each athlete individually with 4 bras each. Most of the athletes have been wearing 2 or 3 vest types of tops altogether as a sports bra to limit the breast movement. Out of about 120 girls, I was only able to have 3 girls without bras. They were sizes 8-10, I had mostly sizes 12 which were the sizes of most of the athletes. Hopefully I will be sending the bras for the 3 girls sometimes this month. The sports coaches were more thrilled than the athletes as by this precious gift, it will not only lift up the athletes confidence but also their performance and that of the team as a whole.

FIJI

Before my arrival in Fiji, my mother and daughter had left a month earlier in time for the 82 boxes coming from Melbourne. Thank you Melbourne Uplift, Liz, Intimo and Jules in Fiji for the shipping and clearing of the 82 boxes through customs. I left Vanuatu for Fiji in time for the arrival of the Sydney donations of 56 suitcases and 10 boxes. These were mainly from the pick ups from Anna at North Sydney, Roz from the ACT Uplift Project, Pacific Brands and the Drop Offs from Debbie and the Girl Guides Association. We had to hire a 3 tonne truck to drop off our freight, and once again we were given a good discount with C.T. Freight Sydney.

We now have a group of 12 bra fitters (friends and cousins volunteers) in Fiji that we take when we do a distribution. Normally a village hall or school is used with about 4 tables set up at the top. Sizes are set up in 6 places along the connected table, ie 10 and under, 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20 plus. Two bra fitters are allocated a size each, one to do bra fitting in front of the table and the second person to find the 3 extra bras once a perfect fit is established. (Each person gets 4 bras). So a total of 6 women come up to the table at a time to be fitted.

Arrival at each new distribution point (if it's a village) always involves a traditional ceremony of welcome (presentation of yagona (kava)), explanation of what the project is about, the conveyance of well wishes of all donors and volunteers and the importance of having a correct fitted bra. Lastly is the mentioning of our one and only rule, that bras are only given to the people present to be fitted.

The extra clothings, panties, nappies, breast pads etc are normally given out to smaller groups as we saw fit. This way a whole group gets the same and no one misses out. These extra gifts are always greatly appreciated as they are not expected by the recipients.

We were able to give away 8 mastectomy bras to four very happy breast cancer survivors. Through some contacts at the hospital we were able to let them know to pass on our details to ladies that enquire about getting them. The four ladies were able to contact each other through their contact group to spread the good news. I am yet to meet a lady sometimes in the next two weeks who had just had her breasts removed in Fiji to confirm some details on their recovery procedures in Fiji, and especially establishing on how best we could help or provide for their needs in obtaining the mastectomy bras.

With the sports bras donated by Pacific Brands we were also able to fit out the Fiji Womens Rugby Sevens team. The majority of these 12 players are similar to the Vanuatu athletes in that they cannot afford a good bra let alone a sports bra.

Naitasiri (about an hour drive from Suva to the interior of Viti Levu)

We were able to cover six villages in the province of Naitasiri, ie Nauluwai, Nasavu, Waidravia, Nabaitavo, Nataveya and Nakorovatu. Fitting out about 400 women and children in one day. Most of the women are subsistence farmers selling fresh market produce on the weekends as their main source of income. These are some of the quotes from the ladies in Naitasiri:

- *A lady believes that the reason why she has back pain is because she doesn't have a proper fitted bra. She is large breasted.*
- *Next time I am going to gather firewood I will have half the burden now as I have well fitted bras for my breasts and will only have the firewood to worry about!*
- *It's been 40 years since I had a new bra, the only one bra I owned has been patched and tied up numerous times to keep me going. And now in my very old age I finally get my bras replaced. It's never too late to keep dreaming.*

Vanua Levu (2nd Biggest Island in Fiji)

The overall trip to Vanua Levu took 10 days and including Christmas away from home for the 13 volunteers including my 5 year old daughter. We hired a 3 tonne truck from Suva to take all the suitcases. The trip started from Suva at 5am on a one and half hour bus ride to Natovi Landing. The bus then boarded a big ship for the 5hrs sail to Vanua Levu. As it was a week away from Christmas, the boat trip was fully booked with 6 buses departing from Suva and all sailing on the big ship. We were fortunate with the staff at Patterson Shipping Company for sending a bus to my house for our group to board first before picking the rest of the passengers from Suva. If we had tried to board with the en masse we would be lucky to be all in the same bus as queuing is unheard of and no seat allocation for passengers. For the 5 hour sail, we were grateful to be upgraded from economy class to a private salon. Upon arriving at Nabouwalu Jetty in Vanua Levu, we were once again boarding the original bus that will take us for another 4 hours drive before we arrived at our first stop in the Macuata Province. We were all billeted to a beautiful family in Naduri village through our contact and good friend Jovesa Saladoka.

Naduri was used as our base for the Macuata Province. We were there for 5 days. Fitting out bras for 13 villages, ie Naduri, Sasa, Navakasobu, Nabukadogo, Korovuli, Korolevu, Naqumu, Namama, Nakalou, Navidamu, Macuata-i-wai, Korotubu and Nanivuda. There were also mothers and daughters pulling up in trucks from outer settlements, mainly non Indigenous women, that had heard about us. Their happy faces and excitements were priceless and hearing their endless words of thank yous were so touching and enough to melt away all tiredness we endured during bra fittings all day. We fitted about 2500 women and children, working from 9am to 11pm nearly every day and only resting when we stop for meals. We had also taken a 4 hours return punt ride during one of the days to Kia Island to fit out bras to 250 women and children. Quote from Kia:

- *The women considered themselves blessed because the cost of the bras they freely received was between \$60 and \$140 each. Losalini Bulinaviu, a women's group leader on the island of Kia, said the Christmas gift was a need for many village women. "Most of the time we don't see the importance of wearing bras and so some women just go without it even when they go to town," Mrs Bulinaviu said. "It is a common attitude especially among women in villages maybe because we stay at home and don't work but that should not be the case. When this group of women came to give out the bras, they spoke to us about the purpose of their donation to the communities and I must say we are so blessed in Kia to receive the bras especially when it is expensive".*

Our next distribution after the Macuata Province was Bua Province. It was a 2 and a half hour ride on our 3 tonne hired truck to Lekutu. We arrived at the Lekutu Primary school at 9am where about 700 women were waiting for us from the nine villages of Votua, Navakasiga, Galoa, Taveya, Yaqana, Namuavoivoi, Banikea, Kavula and Nasowaqa. We left Lekutu at 2pm after a solid bra fitting of 5 hours for 700 women. Next stop was the 3rd and last Province of Cakaudrove a 5 hour truck ride away! Below are quotes from Lekutu.

- *Mrs Mere Rauraumala from Kavula village- she shared that they had all put in to hire a carrier to bring all their women down for the fitting. Their village is located up in the mountains. She said it was well worth their money because the bras they got are even better than the ones that their urban relatives have paid top dollars for.*
- *Sala Baleinamau of Votua village said they don't usually have the opportunity to go out into Labasa town and when they do, it's mostly for family groceries or for a family function. Bra shopping is a luxury that they cannot afford and mostly rely on their urban based relatives to update their wardrobes. So Project Uplift was a blessing in that, they didn't have to travel (and use much needed funds) to town and didn't have to use money to buy bras that usually don't last long. So when they were first informed about the team's intention to visit - it was almost unbelievable. In fact some of the women in the village did not turn up as it was too hard to believe that bras were being given out for free. But those who did turn up were pleasantly surprised by the early Christmas gift.*

Our first stop in Cakaudrove was Buca Bay. We arrived in Buca at 7pm and after a 2 hour rest we were straight into bra fittings for four hours until 1am. We spent 2 days in Buca, fitting about 2000 women and children from 9 villages, ie Buca, Tukavesi, Kanakana, Lumiboso, Karoko, Napuka, Loa, Nause and Natuva. By this time we were averaging 4 to 5 hours sleep a night. And it was pure adrenalin getting us up and through each day, especially seeing tears of joy and gratitude from each woman/girl that we fitted since arriving in Vanua Levu! The area around Buca is mostly catholic villages, so most of the women have over 6 children, and lots of young mothers. The majority have not seen a maternity bra, so it was priceless seeing their faces when shown a maternity bra. It was about 5pm when we were about to leave Buca that we realise it was Christmas eve. We've been so engrossed in the Project that we had not seen any television, listen to the radio, read a newspaper let alone have mobile phone reception in the last 6 days since arriving in Vanua Levu! My 5 year old daughter thank goodness was old enough to realise that Christmas presents are not important or given in Fijian villages! She knew that there will be presents waiting in Sydney.

- *In Buca we met two sisters living together, one aged in the 80s and the other in the 90s. They share one bra between the two of them. If they have to attend a function, or church on Sundays, whoever gets up first gets to wear the bra and attend the function. When we presented them with their bras, they were beside themselves with tears of joy as they will be attending their first church service together for the first time and it was the Christmas church service.*
- *All the old women that we fitted were forever kissing our hands with tears of happiness and gratitude.*

From Buca it was back on the 3 tonne truck to Natewa for an hour and a half ride. We arrived at Natewa and were billeted to my old boarding school mates Adi Ulamila & Adi Lelea's family home. We got in late and it was straight to dinner and traditional ceremony. We were able to have our first sleep in and rest on Christmas day (how ironic) as there will be no bra fittings until after lunch. We stayed in Natewa for 4 days fitting 3000 ladies from 6 villages, ie Natewa, Nawaci, Vusasivo, Vusaratu, Dawa and Muana. As there are no public transport linking the villages, there were women walking from 2 hours away to be fitted their bras.

We left Natewa at midnight on Boxing Day for the 3 hour truck ride to Savusavu. We caught up on sleep for another 2 hours at the bus station waiting for our Bus to depart at 5am. Then it was another 5 hours on the bus to Nabouwalu Jetty for another 5 hours sail back to Viti Levu. We got back to Suva at 6pm after an unforgettable trip of our lifetime. The next day we were off to Beqa island for our rest and recreation and to catch up with families and friends and welcoming in the New Year.

After a week in Beqa it was back to Suva for our last weekend of bra fittings before coming back to Sydney. These last fittings were made through Mrs Evisake Kedrayate and her three daughters, Matilita, Vakaoca and Eta. First stop was to Viwa Island, a one and a half car ride from Suva, and a 15min punt ride. We were able to fit 150 women and children on this little island. From Viwa Island we caught the punt back to the mainland and took another one hour drive to Kiuva. We fitted close to 1000 women and children in Kiuva.

STORIES FROM VIWA:

- *Diana is an old woman from Viwa in her mid 80s but lives with her family in Mokani village, on mainland, about 15mins by boat from Viwa. Diana had heard about Project Uplift coming to her village from other women in Viwa and was determined to be there also. She woke up early Saturday morning before 5am while her family (and probably the village) was still asleep and walked to the (Bau) landing, which was about an hour walk from her home, to look for a boat to bring her across to Viwa. Diana managed to put aside some money from the sales of her produce during the week for her boat fare. She was one of the very few women already waiting in the village hall when the Team arrived and one of the first women to receive her bras. Diana was a very excited woman after this and entertained the rest while they lined up for their fittings. She shared how she only had 2 very old bras, which she saved for church and very important village or family gatherings. They were old and worn out but with her new bras, she now has 'support' for everyday.*
- *Lavenia is the wife of one of the church elders on Viwa. She shared how she and her daughters had owned very old pairs of bras. They had always planned to buy new ones but often money they earned from the sales of their produce would be directed firstly to church commitments and then household groceries. Any leftover funds would then be kept for transportation costs to and from the island. She said buying personal items for her, her daughters and even her husband were secondary to all these. Lavenia shared in particular how she and her eldest daughter shared a 'good' bra between themselves. this was kept aside for either church on Sunday or functions in the village. She laughingly shared how they would dash for the bra while getting ready for these gatherings....the bra was on a 'first come first serve' basis. And because her daughter was always faster, Lavenia would often miss out on Sunday morning church services....because she*

was late at 'grabbing/booking the bra first... and would often attend the afternoon or evening service to which her daughter prefers not to attend....She said they had shared this bra for some years. But with the help of the Project, they now have their very own bras which they are both excited about and cannot wait to wear, especially her, for tomorrow's Sunday morning service. She said it has been a while since she had attended a morning church service.

- *One of the elderly women of the village shared how she only has owned 1 bra since her youth days till now. She only wore this bra for church on Sunday but because she has had it for years, the bra was very old and had begun to fall apart. She has had to stitch it over and over again to keep the pair intact. On some occasions, the bra would be covered with safety pins or the 'nappy pins' of one of her grandchildren. The pins were used to hold the straps in place or substitute for a missing hook or two. The netting around the cups were pretty torn so she would wear an old vest or top under her dress to hide any signs of tears, as long as she was able to look good in her Sunday dress, even for the 1-2 hours spent in church on Sundays, before she saves it again for the coming Sunday service. She shared how life in the village has always been hard and that she never cared to bother her husband or children, who now had their own families to look after, for a new bra. She had always silently prayed for a new bra or two, to replace her current worn out one. With Project Uplift's assistance, she said the prayers of a lot of women, including hers, has been answered. This is something they've always wanted so dearly but felt that other matters in their families took priority over a 'bra'. Even at her old age, she felt it was still important to wear bras and look your best, and the Project has enabled this for her and other women in the village. She said it was now 'out with the old' and time to really feel and look good with her new pairs of bras and that these new bras were more than enough to cater for her till she passes on, as she was in her late 80s. She was the first woman to get her fitting and receive her bras during the visit.*

Below is from - Tima Robanakadavu- President of the Kiuva Village Women's Association

The women of Kiuva are forever thankful with gratitude for being blessed with what was beyond their wildest dream. A lot of us, with myself included have had just one or two bras for as long as we can remember. Our husbands as sole providers could not afford us any bras. Before the Uplift's visit, we use to wear bras that can at least fit around our waist, the cup does not really matter to us. We are so fortunate indeed for now we have the luxury to even know what our correct bra sizes are let alone the variety of colours of bras that we now own. The bras are a perfect fit and it's so comfortable and such a huge relief on our body. Please pass on our heartfelt gratitudes to all those kind hearted people that made it possible for the Uplift Project to reach us here and to the group that continued the great work here in Fiji in fitting each of our women and children. Vinaka vinaka vaka levu. (Thank you thank you so much).

Our last distribution was reserved for Waileya, a squatter's settlement about 20 minutes from the heart of Suva of equal proportions of Indian and Fijian population. Most of the houses in this settlement are built in the mangroves and car tyres are used as foot bridges to access the houses. This was to be the most physically and mentally demanding fitting we had ever done. Thank goodness for all the experiences we mastered from Vanua Levu as it was put to the ultimate test in Waileya. We fitted a record 3000 women and children in 7 hours with stops only for a drink of water. It was pure adrenalin

getting us through seeing the positive and happy vibes in the hall as we just pushed our tired bodies until the last woman was fitted.

In Waileya, five women from 5 different households normally borrow bra from each other if they needed to go to town. So they were grateful and forever thanking us for their new bras as no one knew we were coming until an hour beforehand. A great surprise beyond their wildest dream.

I will sound like a broken record again in taking this opportunity to thank you all once again for your unwavering support in making it possible for us to use the Uplift Project to bring smiles to the women and girls in Fiji with this precious commodity. It was an unforgettable Christmas for about 13000 women as we handed out about 52,000 bras, our biggest distribution to date. If given the chance to “rough it again” (refreshing cold showers and back fixing hard floors) we will do it again as the experience was very humbling and enriching for our group.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends and families who have volunteered tirelessly their time and resources since we took on the Uplift Project. Anything that is needed or requested they miraculously provided to make our distributions more efficient and effective along the way. So fortunate to have a great team working beside me here in Sydney, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Our next distribution is earmarked for July with the hope of distributing in Nadroga, Wainibuka and Levuka Island. We have around 8000 bras already collected in our garage at the moment from Strathfield Girls High School, Debbie’s collection point and Anna’s collection point.



Melbourne Donations arriving at our home in Suva.