

“Mona was my gift from God. While I didn’t give birth to her, I gave life to her.”

A gift from God



Val Smith-Orr travelled to the Philippines in 2006 to collect data for a University of Queensland Research Masters on feeding children with a cleft palate in a developing country. With the help of financial support from St Alban’s Anglican Church parish at Wilston on Brisbane’s north side, the registered nurse has remained in the country to foster a 10-year-old girl, Monalisa, and tend to the sick, mainly burns patients. *FOCUS* spoke to Val in May when she visited parishioners at St Alban’s to talk about her work.

What made you visit the Philippines?

I first visited the Philippines in 1991 for a surgical nursing conference. I returned every year until 2003 then in 2006 I travelled there to collect data for my research.

How did you meet Monalisa?

Breastfeeding is not popular in the Philippines. Many people don’t want people to think they are poor (and can’t afford powdered milk). So they give their babies Am (when you boil rice it’s the water that comes off the rice, it’s milk coloured). They feed the children this after they add some coffee. Some use a brand of milk for adults not children. They don’t get much nourishment. At the first cleft palate clinic I held we had about 300 mums turn up. About 4pm as we were getting ready to leave a lady came up with a very small baby. She weighed 2.7kg. She was wearing only a singlet and she was a strange shade of blue. That little girl was Monalisa. She was very sick, very malnourished. The mother explained she couldn’t give her milk. I offered to care for her, to prepare her for surgery (to repair a cleft palate). She was supposed to stay one month, but we’re still together. Mona was my gift from God. While I didn’t give birth to her, I gave life to her.

What made you stay in the Philippines?

Monalisa and the burns cases. I’m unable to legally adopt Monalisa under Filipino law so I remain in the country to be her mum. And I could not abandon

the burns patients. There is no public health care in the Philippines. If there’s no money, there’s no treatment and most burns happen to the poor. Most burns that happen are scalds from hot water or oil. If you take a child to the emergency room for a burn ... and your child needs a drip, the doctor writes a script, the parent goes out to the pharmacist to buy the drip and equipment, the parents come back and they set up the drip. Then if the child has to be admitted and the parents say we can’t afford to pay they hand them a piece of paper saying, “Home against medical advice” which they sign. It’s really harsh. If the child is admitted, they have to go in with a parent. The parents have to wash the child. If they need pain relief, the parent has to go out with a script to buy it.

What is your relationship with St Alban’s?

In 2002 I moved to Wilston from the Sunshine Coast. I was nervous coming to a new church. The church welcomed me with open arms. From 2002 to 2006 I was a parishioner most Sundays and there were other things happening, Tuesday Bible studies, Gospel and gourmet dinners. My life revolved around the church.

What has the assistance from St Alban’s meant for your work?

I really feel privileged and honoured to be able to come to St Alban’s and speak about the work the people here help me to do. They might think their help is a small thing but what they do is huge over

there. It’s very hard for me to do the job that I do but I can do it knowing people here are always supporting me in my work.

Can you tell us about your burns work?

I was burns-trained using methods pioneered by New Zealand plastic surgeon Sir Archibald McIndoe (who helped heal and prevent scarring in air force men who were inflicted with burns during World War II). My first patient in 2006 presented nine days after suffering major burns to his legs from falling into a pit for making charcoal. The family took him to hospital and they sent him home. I was horrified he had such a large injury and was sent home. I took him to hospital and they did a debridement (cut off all the burnt skin) but they didn’t do skin grafts. So I bought up all the (dressings) in the pharmacy to treat him at home. It was an old fashioned treatment but after four months he healed and he could walk. This year I was giving a burns prevention lecture and his wife was there. She stood up and told everyone how I had saved her husband’s legs.

What are your plans for the future?

I’m working with doctors at the James Gordon Memorial Hospital in Olongapo City in the province of Zambalás where I live to set up a burns unit. It will be the first burns unit outside Manilla. The project requires \$265,000 to build. So far we have raised \$1, 600.