

THE CHANGE MAKER



LIFE OF A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

JOHN WARD ON LIVING LIFE WITH A MISSION



Scratch the surface of John Ward's life and what soon emerges is a man who has spent his life giving to others, as a priest, farmer, trail rider, pilot, business owner, husband, father and social entrepreneur.

For most of us, building, owning and running a rural conference centre and wedding venue on 120 acres of bushland in Australia's picturesque Yarra Valley, would be challenge enough. Not for John & Louise Ward, they are also actively involved with three charities, one of which they set up themselves and which necessitates trips each year to a remote mountainous region of Papua New Guinea.

JOHN, LOUISE AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Missionaries had started to 'open up' the remote area of the Gulf Province in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s. It was an inaccessible area of river deltas and swamps surrounded by a soaring mountain range covered with dense rainforest. Lost in rain clouds and fog for months at a time, it's a dangerous area to try to fly into. Two priests, two lay mission-

aries and several local parishioners have died in plane crashes in the last 50 years. Father Jean Besson, founder of the mission in Kanabea, was among them.

John Ward was a part time Chaplain with the Royal Australian Air Force in Victoria, Australia. He learned to fly light aircraft so that he could one day fly to Kanabea where his Seminary was affiliated with the above-mentioned mission. His first trip there was in 1969, six years before PNG gained independence from Australia. At this point, there was 80% infant mortality. Twelve years after that first trip, in 1981, John went to Kanabea to live and work on the mission with the Kamea

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tribe for three years.

In three years, the bonds he made were deep and lasting. And when John left the priesthood and PNG in 1983 at the age of 36, to get married and start a family, he knew his involvement with the Kamea people would continue. He set up [PNG Corporate Mission](#), a charitable organisation, close to both his and wife Louise's heart. With assistance from Melbourne Overseas Mission, and funded in part by donations and sponsorships through the Yarra Valley Conference Centre, John pilots a number of trips each year back to Kanabea, taking with him medical supplies and a volunteer medical team, in the Conference Centre's light aircraft.

The aim of their PNG mission is to develop Kanabea's hospital and school. There is still 8% infant mortality nation wide and only 20% of children go to school. 20,000 Kamea people live in this remote mountain-

ous region, accessible only by air, and many of the locals will walk for three days through treacherous bush to come to one of John's medical clinics. The medical team run vital inoculation clinics and provide essential everyday medical treatment, which would otherwise be unavailable.

BUSINESS TO BUSINESS SUPPORT

The Yarra Valley Conference Centre's guests are an essential component of the mission's structure. John & Louise address each group who stays at their venue and tell them of their vital work in PNG, often resulting in corporate donations and sponsorship. John is always on the look out for volunteers to offer their expertise and is heartened when guests are moved to do so having heard about the mission's work.

Their plans will require considerable more corporate

funding and involvement. In 2010 John drew up plans for a new hydroelectric system for Kanabea to replace a 50 year old antiquated system that had not been operational for several years. Power will make such a difference to the infrastructure and the people. Currently, when one of the volunteer doctors performs surgery, they wear a head torch, so that if/when the power goes out, they can continue to operate! As if a salient reminder of the need for improved medical facilities, John recently learned of the death of Bishop Tavel with whom he spoke face-to-face just last week in PNG. They had worked closely with each other over the years. Tavel died of malaria; to us in the first world, an easily preventable disease, to the Kamea people, an every day killer.

FUTURE PLANS

John's plans for Kanabea are nothing if not ambitious. In addition to the new hydroelectric system, he aims to sponsor a full time doctor at Kanabea, renovate the dilapidated buildings, purchase a new turbine aircraft for the community and build a road to the main ports of Lea to the north and Kerema in the South. But with all progress and intervention, comes risk. When the road is built and Kanabea is more accessible, it will be exposed to the risks that plague the rest of the

country, AIDS, violence and corruption. John is well aware of this. He will continue to lobby governments both home and abroad, governments he feels have let down this remote area of PNG. He is constantly on the look out for ways to involve the corporate sector and spends much of his time canvassing for funding.

It's hard to put a figure on how much the PNG Corporate Mission has raised over the years, or how much John, Louise and the Conference Centre has 'invested'. John supplies the aircraft (\$300,000) and each trip alone costs in the region of \$20,000 with fuel and running costs, not to mention his time. When you're running two sometimes three trips a year, it soon mounts up.

CHARITIES CLOSER TO HOME

Set backs come in all guises and when we least expect them. In 2009, the horrendous bushfires now known as Black Saturday destroyed 90% of John and Louise's business, the [Yarra Valley Conference Centre](#). They were well prepared but more than

anything they were lucky, when the extreme bushfire that was to kill 171 people roared through their property. With help from one of their children and his friends, they fought the blaze and managed to save their 20-year-old purpose-built timber conference centre but were unable to save their sheds, machinery, equipment, hay and 120 acres of fencing.

Lucky to escape themselves, and with a mammoth recovery effort of their own ahead of them, they typically set about helping others who had suffered so much more. When they heard about the couple who had lost their Wildlife Shelter in the fires, they donated five acres of their property to them and so [Babbajin Wildlife Shelter](#) was born. Guests to the Conf

erence Centre have the unique opportunity to visit the wildlife shelter which is not open to the public, so they get a rare insight into care the rescued injured animals receive. All made possible by the generosity of the Wards.

CHARITIES BECOME ALIGNED

The third charity the couple are involved with has been going the longest. Moira Kelly AO has been friends with John and Louise for years. Since they've known her, she has helped hundreds of children in need the world over.



13 years ago John and Louise were one of several founding members of Moira Kelly's [Children First Foundation](#), set up to fund Moira's charitable works. John is an active member of the board and works with the foundation to evacuate children from PNG who need critical medical attention that can't be had in their remote location. Louise assists Moira on trips overseas, and has been to Albania, Somalia and Iraq. She helped Moira to bring two Iraqi children Ahmed and Emmanuel to Australia, Ahmed is now a Paralympic swimmer and Emmanuel is following his dream of becoming a singer and last

year audition on the X-factor.

NO TIME LIKE NOW

John is his own man, quietly unconventional, choosing to look outside the square. Louise is a juggler, with multiple events and groups on the go at once. They make a dynamic pair, often choosing to fly in the face of the norm, taking on bigger challenges, rarely going with the general flow, always considering others.

Among a sea of post it notes, reminders and lists above their desk in their office, is an African proverb pinned up on a

card. It has been there for years and is a daily reminder to all who come to them, that here are a couple with a world to change and much to achieve. 'The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.'

VOLUNTEERS AND CORPORATE SUPPORT

PNG Corporate Mission relies on local volunteers, corporate sponsorship and donations to enable them to carry out their essential work – John can be contacted on [via email](#).



If it moves me, I'll gladly write about it. Helen Collier, owner of Just Words, writes for businesses, magazines, philanthropists and always ...for pleasure.



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