

Always go back: a return to Karkar

By Hilary Langford



David Keating had to supervise the building of his high school at Karkar Island in 1969

April 21st was the third day of our Aurora Expeditions Adventure Cruise. We had set our alarm for 6.50am, wanting to be on the bridge at 7.00 to see our arrival at Karkar Island. David had spent three idyllic years on Karkar from 1969 -1971. It had been his first posting as a Headmaster and he had been responsible for opening the school. This had been a very productive time for career and professional development in his life. Now he was keen to see the longer term results of those earlier idealistic years. But we were also prepared for disappointments. It had been 37 years since he had departed the island. So we stumbled up the several flights of stairs to the bridge, only to discover that we weren't to arrive at Karkar Island until 1.30pm! Somehow, the calculations had been wrong! What a great disappointment. The school had been told we would be arriving that morning, and we just couldn't wait to get there.

Then, our on-board anthropologist, Heather Young-Leslie, spent some time talking about our visit to the Witu Islands on the previous day. She explained that theirs' is a matrilineal society (which means that husbands come to the women's village to live, use the women's land, but are buried back in their home land when they die). After death, all people become spirits who protect the village. So burials are in the centre of the village, creating a sacred space. Visitors don't walk into villages without an invitation. The village centre, therefore, is nothing like the village square in European towns.

Heather also talked at length about bilums. Bilums are always a presentation with great meaning! It is considered that a woman's essence is incorporated into a bilum while it is being made. And bilums appear at all the important occasions in people's lives: a child is put into a bilum as soon as it is born, it is often a lover's early gift etc. When a bilum is presented, typically a reciprocal gift is expected. A celebratory meal will follow to mark this occasion. Heather said many bilums are recognizable as coming from particular places. On Witu, she was surprised to see a lady with a bilum that she knew was from Madang. When she asked about this, the

owner said her son had travelled there to attend high school. He purchased this bilum as a gift to thank her for the sacrifices she had made for his education. This type of presentation is very significant, and that mother will continue to use the bilum until it wears out, or she dies.

Finally, after lunch, we were told to prepare for our arrival on Karkar. We would be first off the ship. We excitedly walked down the steps to our awaiting zodiac. My sister, Gretel and her husband, were joining us, but we didn't know if we would be wasting their time. We had no idea what was awaiting us at the school.

We arrived on the beach, and were greeted by the usual swarm of kids and adults. Paul and Barbara Goodyear, son and daughter-in-law of Noel Goodyear (a long time planter on the island), were there and Barbara kindly offered to drive the four of us to the High School. David asked if we could go via the airstrip, where he used to train for the 800 and 1,500 metres events in the South Pacific Games. He was surprised to hear that the daily flights from Madang were no more. The strip was now only used infrequently for local charter aircraft.

Then to the school! We knew they were expecting us. But we really didn't have any idea of the welcome and ceremony that had been planned. Firstly we waited outside the administration block for someone to show us around the school.

The School Board

We were escorted to the Library where the Board of Governors had been meeting since earlier that day, waiting for us. We apologised profusely for our late arrival. The first welcome speech was made by Mr Ken Fairweather, local member for Sumkar in the PNG National Parliament (ex-Melbourne, and clearly very "simpatico" with the locals). He said that the school had experienced some very tough years. Things had been very bad. (We never did find out exactly what had happened.) He also added that the school had been in dispute with the PNG Education Department, wanting to upgrade the school into a secondary school, which would allow them to teach Grade 11 and 12. Their High School status had been only funded to teach to Grade 10. Fortunately, the Education Department had recently agreed to the change of status and two Grade 11 classes had commenced in 2008. Ken said they hoped this would prove to be a turnaround! He added, "The school cannot get any lower than it has been in the last few years. We are determined to turn things around! But enough of this! This is not my day... Today is David Keating's day!"

The Principal, Mr Ben TAMILONG, also welcomed us. He was an ex-student of this school, and was very motivated to make improvements. In his speech, he announced the new library was to be named the David Keating Library!

David responded to these welcomes. He reminded the Board of his early history with Karkar. He told them how he was to be sent to Mt Hagen, as the Karkar High School had not been built. However, he had insisted on coming to Karkar and, together with the villagers, built the first bush materials school in two months. He reminded them that "difficult times create strength, and that there are benefits from having to overcome adversity". There were many nods of heads and sounds of agreement. The Board appeared resolute in its determination to re-create a top class school. David then handed over a small bag of school supplies as a token of support for the school.

The School Assembly

While we were meeting with the Board, the whole school had assembled on the front lawns of the school. Clothes, all colours of the rainbow, greeted us. A stage, with intricately carved posts, had been decorated with palms and flowers. First

the students (about 620 of them) were lined up by their teachers, in their classes, in neat rows. They sang the PNG National Anthem, slowly and sincerely, enunciating each and every word. Then the students pledged themselves to PNG; a pledge that included sentiments such as everyone working together and remaining free and proud.

The Principal, Ben Tami long, spoke, naming the many highly successful graduates from Karkar High School who were now making important contributions to PNG. The people he named had been students while David was Headmaster. Modako Suari was just one of these. Ben apologized that they were unable to attend today's celebrations due to their commitments elsewhere in the country. He told the students that the new library was to be called the David Keating Library. A round of applause marked this announcement.

Local Member Ken Fairweather spoke next. In his speech he praised the teachers and the students for the recent improvements in the school. Apparently everyone had worked extremely hard, including building a new classroom for the Grade 11s, and making everything look so beautiful. The gardens had been trimmed, the lawns were mowed, and there was not a thing out of place in very extensive school grounds.

Then a representative from David's first class, Kubul Kakema spoke. He now teaches at a Kudoka Primary School. He described how frightened they used to be of David. But then he added that the discipline had made them what they are today. "He was the best Headmaster of this school!"

Finally David spoke. He told everyone assembled how pleased he was to be visiting the school he started back in 1969. He was delighted the school logo and motto was still the same as it was when the school started. He reminded them why the school motto was selected. He recited the words, "Bares Dabai". As the students know there are two language groups on Karkar Island: Waskia and Takia. This motto uses one word from each language. Translated it meant "Strength in Unity." His comments resulted in an eruption of delighted laughter from the students. We wondered if the original meaning of the school's motto might have been lost to the current generation? But David's words instantly connected with them! They listened intently. And this was no mean feat given the time they had spent sitting in the hot sun, listening to a fourth speech!

Presentations

David was then presented with a beautiful bilum. We had already been shown the Karkar Island bilums in this morning's lecture from our anthropologist. We knew the significance of acquiring a traditional bilum in these circumstances. David's bilum was decorated with betel nuts, mustard beans, tobacco, and flowers. Hilary looked on enviously, and was then delighted when a second bilum was presented to her!

Next an amazing necklace, decorated with five boar's teeth (representing unity between all things), was placed around David's neck. These are rarely sold to tourists, and are typically only acquired as a gift to someone of special standing. To Hilary's delight, she was presented with a female version! Apparently her necklace was the kind that is typically part of a bride price. We were told these should be worn during sing-sings.

Finally, David's original students presented him with a second billum. This time it was a finely woven synthetic one, presumably designed for more everyday use. He will create quite a sensation when he carries this into Coles in New Farm!

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A photo session followed, with David posing with some of his original students. Their pleasure and excitement at spending time with “Mr Keating” was obvious. David had brought some photos from those early days, and these were enthusiastically perused, with much finger pointing and exclamations as they recognized themselves and fellow students.

An aging expat man arrived, quietly ascending the stage. Sir John Middleton, a plantation owner from the Kulili Plantation, and resident of Karkar since the late 1940's, had been the local member when David was Headmaster. David was delighted that he had taken the effort to drive to the school. He had been one of the white planters who had been very supportive when the school was being established.

We were then asked to walk around the school. David was thrilled to see the old basketball court that he and a cohort of students had built in 1971. The arc mesh set into the foundations had done its job. The surface was still fairly level and smooth. There must be a huge amount of concrete that David has left in PNG that still provides much entertainment and physical activity.

Hilary continued walking with the 5 school prefects. She said, “It must be good to be one of the bosses in the school now.” She was immediately rebuked, “We are leaders, not bosses”. What a wonderful distinction! We passed the girls’ dormitories, the dining room, the boys’ dormitories, and a new building being built to house the new Grade 11 boarders.

As we walked towards the sports field with an athletic track (another of David’s legacies), we passed the Manual Arts Block. Outside was a huge sign saying:

“Ba Dave Keating Welcome to Karkar Island. Pioneer Headmaster of Karkar High School”

“Ba” means “Father” or is a traditional honorific for someone of distinction. Another lovely surprise on a day filled with surprises! Unfortunately, the sign wasn’t quite accurate. It stated that David had been at the school from “1969-1974”. He was only on Karkar between 1969 and 1971. But the sentiments were well-meaning. The sports field was in perfect condition, with the 400m athletic track marked clearly in creosote, just as it had been when David was on the island.

We had noticed an impressive school sign, “Karkar High School”, at the entrance to the school, and as we were walking close by, David asked to be photographed beside it. Hilary noticed that there were mutterings in the ranks while this request was made, but did not know what this meant. We took the photo, regardless.

What we didn’t know was that we were being taken back to the main stage, where David was asked to unveil a new school sign proclaiming, “Karkar Secondary School”. They were telling the world they would now officially teach Grade 11 and Grade 12 students. Another most symbolic event in the day! Now we understood why they weren’t so keen on David being photographed beside the old sign. We were happy to have both photos representing the old and the new!

It had been an exhilarating and exhausting afternoon. We were emotionally drained, and also rather hot and dehydrated from the humid weather. We were taken into the teachers’ staffroom and drank thirstily from cans of soft drink, joking that all teachers’ staff rooms around the world look the same!

By now our transport back to the zodiacs had arrived. We were loaded, still laden with bilums and necklaces, onto the open back of a utility already filled with many locals and people from the ship. This was travel PNG style: a PMV (people moving vehicle, the usual form of transport.) The breeze created by the wind turbulence was greatly appreciated after the heat of the afternoon. We reached the shore, and met Noel Goodyear, another plantation owner who had married a Karkar

woman in the early 1960s. He had been a resident of the island since that time, living here permanently for 50 years, and was another acquaintance of David's from his time on Karkar. Finally we climbed onto the zodiac for our trip back to our ship! What a day! David looked tired but radiant!

We could not have felt more pleased that we had made this journey to PNG. David was surprised at the magnitude of the welcome and the depth of the memories. He felt honoured and humbled at the naming of the library and, at times, felt overwhelmed by the kind words of staff and students.

That evening, we were asked to talk to all the other passengers about our day. They were interested, amazed, and probably a little envious when they heard our story. Many expressed an interest to assist with donations of books for the Library. Exhausted, but too excited to sleep, we tried to unwind. We finally retired after midnight!

Hilary Langford
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