

Delivering the first batch of 10 'RotaRunner' Wheelchairs to Fiji

"You really ought to go. You're the President!" urged my immediate predecessor, Graeme Isaacson. Well, thank you, Graeme, I am glad I took your advice: The recent trip to Fiji would count as one of the most remarkable experiences of my life. "Living Rotary to the max" takes on a new meaning...

Ian Mayberry picked me up at a rather unchristian hour in the morning, and at about 05:30 am we caught up with John Appleton, Des La Rance, Graeme Isaacson, Barry Lea, Conrad Martens, and John Withers (not in order of beauty...) and the 'A Current Affairs' team from Channel Nine at Brisbane Inter-national Airport. Immediately, quite naturally playing our roles as TV Stars (well, for 05:30am not a bad effort!), we loaded the wheel chairs "officially" onto the Oversize Baggage conveyor. John Withers also handed me



a great big carton full of his Spectacle and Jewellery Cleaning Kits, together with a very official sounding letter that was supposed to impress Customs Officers in Fiji... Thank you John, other than blushing right up to my bold patch and stuttering, I have always been able to keep a poker face when dealing with Customs Officers, you know that!

Some guy from Qantas was supposed to meet us at Nadi Airport to facilitate the transfer of the RotaRunners through Customs. He must have been living on 'Fiji Time'; he was nowhere to be found.

It took us over two hours to find someone who would arrange for the chairs to go through Customs without duty being paid. (Only once have I seen, during the four days, our TV Reporter Linda Rose's face show real annoyance: that's when she offered to simply pay for the duty. But that would have been too simple and straight forward. Customs personnel are the same the world over, wherever you go...) Getting our hire cars was not any smoother, but eventually, about three hours after landing, we were on our way to Suva.

It happened to be my birthday on that day: Yes, it was the first time (and probably also the last) that I celebrated together with a famous TV Reporter and her crew, a famous inventor of a method to make wheel chairs from old bicycles and a guy who would, without warning, in the dining restaurant of the hotel, pull his zipper down in front of a TV camera... One of the lady guests at the table next to us couldn't believe her luck; her pacemaker ran without the need of batteries for the rest of the evening, I'm sure!

Friday started off early for Des: Linda Rose, our TV reporter, had arranged a Radio Interview with one of Fiji's top announcers, James Bhagwan. Des' outline of what we did and how it came about thus was



broadcast throughout the island nation.

We then met Frank Hilton (see President's Message 03/09/97 for a more detailed description of this remarkable man) and his School Administrator, Mary-Ann. Also, Ross Addison, the representative of the Rotary Club of Suva North, met us briefly. Frank Hilton in total runs 7 schools around the island, plus a boarding hostel for children who cannot travel to/from home. There is also a sheltered workshop, offset printing, packaging etc - they even earn some money.

Soon we were off to the villages above the port of Suva to deliver the first wheel chairs, in the village of Valelevu Hart. Children everywhere! Half the village was at the gate to meet us (probably mostly due to the TV crew assembling their gear; well, that would be an event even here in Oz!). The houses are small (about the size of our average garage), mostly concrete or Besser Block construction, poorly painted, starkly

devoid of any luxuries, without the appliances we all consider stock standard necessities in our homes. In the words of Ian Mayberry: "It was not until we had arrived, that I realized the poverty these families are living in. Quite certainly, in both monetary as well as utilitarian value, the RotaRunner would be the most prized possession in their household." Frank Hilton introduced us to the mother of two children suffering from Muscular



Distrophy. I was outside, when I heard a young girl's voice singing. *Singing?!?* Hang on: these children possess hardly any earthly goods, have disabilities that would scare the pants off a "normal" person - - - But yes: she sang for us a beautiful song, and obviously enjoyed the performance. As Des La Rance said to me later: "I will never forget the eyes of the first girl to be presented with a wheelchair. Suddenly, her life had changed from being unable to participate in daily village life to being mobile. It meant a complete change of life to her." The girl's mother was simply overwhelmed. Imagine, just for a moment, the contrast. Put yourself into her shoes: most people much more



worldly cannot handle being surrounded by a TV crew.

In that same village, another three chairs were handed over, and a girl just across the valley hardly could wait to receive hers. From there, we moved on to the suburb of Toorak (the similarity to Melbourne's playground of the rich and famous ends right there with its name!). And again, the effervescence shining out of those beautiful, happy eyes, the exuberance, the keenness to climb up onto her chair all by herself by the sheer strength of her arms (remember: her legs are only two tiny, underdeveloped limbs) and the expression of achievement when she actually made it...

On Saturday we all met again at Frank Hilton's Special School, for a group session with the children who were presented chairs. A 'lesson' was given for the benefit of the TV crew, and we handed out some Koala soft toys for the children. Then, the whole class and the adult Fijians present sang that hauntingly beautiful farewell song 'Isa Lei'. It's moments like these that really make life worthwhile.



That night, the 'Australian Contingent' enjoyed a beautiful meal of a traditional local dish, accompanied by a lovely drop of Oz wine (now, that's multiculturalism!) on a floating restaurant. Back at the hotel, we then continued to discuss "how we would run the world, if..." until I had no option to kick Ian and Des out of my room. (I had run out of wine).



Sunday saw us on our way back to Nadi. We briefly stopped half way at the famous Fijian Resort, near Saratoga. Well, what can I say? "Diagonally opposite" is the expression. Visually a very beautiful resort, just like in the tourist brochures: Thatched Huts, no lack of paint anywhere, everything minutely in place, sterile, cocooned, shining. Beer at \$4.50 a can. The mostly artificial smiles and trained greeting of the staff. The guests, mostly bored out of their wits, exposing their white bellies to the Fijian sun (we only have one week to get a tan, you know!)

On to Nadi, check in at the Airport (much smoother going out than in!). And immediately I was confronted with some real live problem again: Just what the heck can I buy my kids as a present?
President Franz.