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To Fiji, in the wake of Cyclone Evan

A service project, organized by students from New Zealand and Australia, became a lot more challenging than originally planned.

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When tropical cyclone Evan hit Fiji just a week before Christmas, help was already on its way.

Students from Glenrowan Study Centre in New Zealand, and Drummond Study Centre in

Melbourne had already planned a service project to a small village in the province of Ra, named Navunibitu.

The cyclone simply added more challenges: crops were destroyed, the power was out, and the roof over the toilet block of the boys' dormitory at the local boarding school had been blown off. It was reportedly the worst cyclone for 20 years.

So it was fitting that the twenty-one volunteers set to work on the boys' dormitory, turning it from a run-down and weather-beaten wreck to a brand new building, ready just in time for the 2013 school year.

Headmaster of Navunibitu Catholic School Keleto Turagakerei said he was very happy with the final product.

“It's been a great joy and inspiration to see these young energetic boys do

their daily task with such enjoyment,” he said.

“This renovation will surely last for years for the boys who will lay comfortably, with warmth and enjoy their years in the school.”

The volunteers all paid their own way to travel and spend their holiday working in the heat, albeit with almost-daily monsoon rains.

And they all learnt lasting lessons, including the fact you don’t actually need power all the time.

Gerard Trolove, a builder’s apprentice from Christchurch, said: “it was a new challenge to only have the generator for sporadic use of the power tools.”

“It’s a bit like Kiwi ingenuity going head to head with Fiji time and the Fiji way of life.”

And while the villagers were very thankful for the help, there were some odes of deep gratitude from many of the volunteers. After all, the local villagers had cooked, cleaned and waited upon the visitors like they were close family. Such is the hospitable treatment in a Fijian village, especially after the customary sevusevu welcoming ceremony.

Tim Helbano, a student from Wellington, New Zealand, said he was amazed at the care.

"The hospitality and warmth of the Fijians is amazing. They cook delicious meals, clean our clothes and look after us and they are so happy to do it," he said.

Raphael Adeloju, an accounting and finance graduate from Melbourne, said the simple life and cheerfulness of the villagers made a deep impression on him.

"People here have less and yet they are willing to give us so much. The generosity is impressive and they are so happy — we can learn from this in Australia and New Zealand," he said.

The mission also bears the name of the parish of St Francis Xavier, and sits high on a hill overlooking one of Fiji's most picturesque views - Viti Levu Bay in Ra province. It is also home to the historic church of the 'Black Christ' – which describes the large mural by French artist Jean Charlot in 1962.

While the volunteers spent two and a half weeks working and learning Fijian phrases from the local youth, spending time in the historic church was also a major part of their plans.

Jacob Fransen, from Hamilton, New Zealand, was the youngest member of the team and said he won't forget the regular times for prayer.

"Being able to live out my faith here and help the village at the same time has been wonderful," he said.

"We had a late vigil Mass for the New Year and then celebrated with kava and singing and dancing, despite all the rain."

Many are keen to return to Fiji next summer to continue rebuilding work in more remote villages after the devastating cyclone.

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