

NEWS RELEASE



August 15, 2007

CELEBRATING SEVEN YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP WITH SUAI, EAST TIMOR

**Public meeting. 6.30pm Thursday August 23 – Leo’s Spaghetti Bar Function Room,
55 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda**

The City of Port Phillip will celebrate its seven years of friendship with Suai, a coastal town in East Timor, with a free public event at 6.30pm Thursday August 23 at Leo’s Spaghetti Bar in St Kilda.

Guest of honour is Simao de la Silva Barreto, the coordinator of the Suai Community Centre, which is supported by the City of Port Phillip and Friends of Suai. Mr Barreto will present a short video on a successful nursery-agro forestry project produced by the Suai youth media team. Other speakers include St Kilda Ward councillor, Karen Sait, Glenyys Romanes, 2007 East Timor Parliamentary Election Observer and Bill Armstrong AO, chairperson, Friends of Suai.

Mr Barreto, 39, who is visiting Australia for two weeks, is also a part-time secondary school teacher. He worked as a translator for the UN in Suai from 1999 to 2004 and is currently finishing a degree in English, his thesis having been delayed because of last year’s political crisis.

“Education is naturally very important for me, as it is for all East Timorese,” he said. “That’s why I’m pleased to be able to visit Elwood College, St Columba’s, Elwood Primary, Galilee Primary School and Caulfield Grammar for a schools civics conference while I’m in Australia. I hope that we can build relationships between local school students and Suai students.

“This is easier said than done, of course. Firstly, the Suai students need to learn English but, while we run classes at the Suai community centre, only the teacher has a textbook. Libraries aren’t an alternative because there aren’t any. None of the students have anything they can take away and study so progress is not as fast as it should be.

“The Suai community centre has six refurbished computers that came from the City of Port Phillip but none are connected to the Internet. There used to be landline but someone dug it up for the scrap metal and we’re still waiting for Timor Telecom to install a new one.

“In the absence of the internet and a reliable mail service, a plan for students to communicate via CDs delivered by people going back and forth between Australia and East Timor will be established through Friends of Suai. Kids could start to get to know each other that way.”

Mr Barreto said Suai students would obviously benefit if Elwood College or other schools raised money for textbooks, audio tapes, other resources and scholarships.

“But we don’t just want charitable activities – we’re hoping for real friendship and a cultural exchange,” he said. “The idea of sending a Suai student to study in Port Phillip has been raised but it would cost the equivalent of a year’s education for eleven children.”

Other Australian schools involved in friendship programs have raised money for musical instruments and sports equipment for East Timorese children.

The Suai Community Centre also runs a variety of training courses including sewing classes on eight treadle machines. Developing projects in education, health and agriculture are priorities for the future.

Through a \$5000 grant from Jewish aid Australia ten orphaned children and one young man with a disability have been awarded scholarships to provide for uniforms, shoes and school books. Young girls often remain at home to help their families rather than finish their education. Through this program, half the scholarships go to girls.

Cr Sait said that raising money for scholarships, even on a class by class basis, wasn’t an impossible task for local students and others.

“The scholarships cost only \$80 pa for primary school students and \$100 pa for high school students but these modest outlays can transform lives,” she said. “Some 58 per cent of the adult population in East Timor is illiterate so education is a must. An estimated 42 per cent of the population is under 15 so meeting even basic education needs is enormously difficult.”

The City of Port Phillip is appealing to ratepayers to support the rebuilding of Suai which was almost totally destroyed in the independence vote of 1999. A form for donations from \$10 and upwards went out with the 2007-2008 rate notices several weeks ago. This year, the people of Port Phillip will fund projects worth \$78,000.

Suai and the surrounding district of Covalima have not experienced the political turmoil that has wracked Dili and other parts of East Timor over the past year.

To donate to Friends of Suai, fill out the form included with the rates notice, donate on line through <http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/portphillipgives.html> or send cheques made out to Australian Volunteers International, c/- Friends of Suai, Private Bag 3, St Kilda 3182 or ring Pat Jessen on 9209 6777.

Enquiries:

Carmel Shute
Media Officer
Tel: 03 9209 6163
Mobile: 0412 569 356

After hours

Karen Sait
St Kilda Ward councillor
Ph: 03 8598 9624
Mobile: 0411 098 477

Council webpage: www.portphillip.vic.gov.au