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## A true friend

Seona Smiles

Saturday, October 21, 2017

FRIEND, the acronym for the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development celebrates its 15th anniversary this week. A homegrown community development non-government organisation based on the side of a hill on Kings Rd, Tuvu, not far from the sugar city of Lautoka.

The important words in the foundation's name are 'rural' and 'integrated'. Everything they do is linked through their social, health and economic programmes so that what they grow on their farms and process into products ranging from star apple tea to cassava flour to mango pickles and hand-made paper, is directed at the social, health and economic wellbeing of the communities involved to help them break out of poverty.

Social empowerment includes learning about governance; sustainable livelihoods involves income generation; and sustainable medicine is a health program that targets lifestyle. For instance farming is not just a good garden, it is also about food security, care of the environment, certifiable organic farming, nutrition for growing children, getting health checks, keeping active, learning basic bookkeeping, establishing a cooperative and how to run an operation to supply a market. It takes in youth activities and training and care and respect for the aged.

All of it is directed at poverty alleviation by building community self confidence, use of traditional knowledge and allowing people to develop with dignity. Which involves a lot of listening to people's ideas, watching the ways they find best to use, and respecting their knowledge - from grandma's mango chutney recipe to when to plant certain crops and how to make use of wild foods that have fallen out of modern diets. New methods of financial management, food security, keeping healthy and how to convert available resources into new ideas for generating income are tailored to what individuals and separate communities require and desire.

The exact opposite of experts telling people what to do and how to do itâ€¦."it's not a one size/fits all operation," founder and director Sashi Kiran explained. A former journalist turned community worker who had become anguished over rural poverty and resource wastage, Kiran began building FRIEND from the ground up in 2001, always with a vision of a rural based, integrated operation.

FRIEND started its community development work in Ba and Lautoka, with Kiran working part time as a Peace Facilitator and using the income to pay volunteers, administration and establishment costs. An early project was a scholarship scheme to help poor children attend school and in 2002 a saving scheme in 10 communities in Ba was launched. The following year FRIEND's famous tamarind chutney, still a popular product in the FRIEND Fiji Style brand range, became a start up for an income generation project developed with the Ba Senior Citizens Centre and is now part of the Sustainable Livelihoods program.

Over the ensuing years, FRIEND's activities and reach expanded, with the help of a Royal visit in 2005 that gained useful national and international attention and a number of awards for the quality products that helped attract funding.

Developments included handmade paper and cards manufacture by hearing impaired youth, the beginning of Community Governance training and expansion of the food product lines to include more favourites such as mango pickle.

In 2009 the foundation acquired a plot of land at Tuvu where their headquarters now stand. The first buildings opened there in August 2010.

Also in 2009 FRIEND launched its Health Program to combat non communicable diseases, which evolved into SMILE - Sustainable Medicine Improving Lives through Empowerment. Medical workers conducted NCD clinics in poor and remote communities and will now operate a central clinic at Tuvu that will provide medical, surgical, physiotherapy, laboratory testing and pharmaceutical services.

Tropical Cyclone Evan seriously damaged the Tuvu centre in December 2012. Although it lost its workshop and Conference Centre and half the roof of its main office, FRIEND bounced back in no time to rebuild and extend its office space and develop a new state of the art Food Production Centre. It has also established a Profit Centre in Tuvu, with space for craft workshop, boutique shop, restaurant and conference centre. The trading arm is known as Tatadra Pasifika to support livelihood initiatives.

There is also a staff village because the people of FRIEND are as important as its visionary programs. From a group of just three people the core staff is now more than 40, with others in offices in Lautoka and Labasa. FRIEND's team includes professionals in community development, agriculture, livestock, medicine, social welfare, counseling, data analysis, quality control management, programme administration, food production and media and communication. But they are not necessarily recruited on paper qualifications, there are dedicated workers who bring skills born of experience and lifelong learning, even traditional learning stretching back many lifetimes.

"For example we have a group who were employed as security officers. When we needed some new furniture they turned out to be excellent carpenters and not only build the wooden pieces we need, but innovate and design all sorts of pieces," Kiran said, showing a bamboo 'takeaway' container, still in developmental stage. Their work is everywhere in the centre, from chairs and display stands to decorative ceilings and bookshelves.

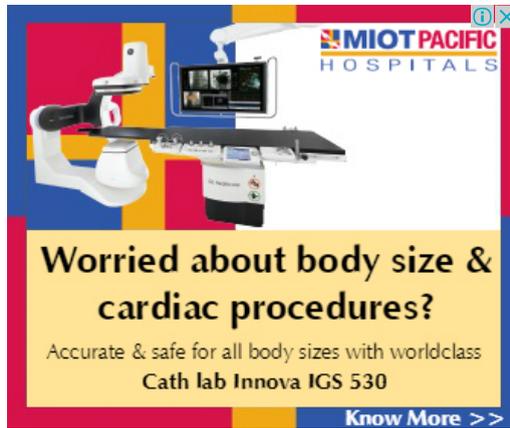


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