



My time teaching in Tanna was so special



I fell in love with Vanuatu from my first visit



With some of the students I worked with

TIDES OF CHANGE

After so much destruction, I had to focus on rebuilding

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The shelves were lined with books and the kids beamed as they excitedly explored their new space.

"I can't believe we did it," I said to my colleague, Jen.

It was July 2014, and for the past three years, my team and I had been

building a school library on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu.

Instead of bringing a construction team from my native Australia, I'd involved the community in every step of the build.

The school kids had dug the first hole for the foundation, a local elder had made the 3000 bricks, and apprentice carpenters from the nearby college

had put up the walls. It was hard work, but I was extremely passionate about it.

Years earlier, aged 20, I'd travelled to Vanuatu for the first time to do three months of teaching as part of my education degree. I'd fallen in love with the community spirit and enthusiasm of the children.

After working as a teacher in Sydney and London for 10 years, I'd been drawn back to Vanuatu. I'd launched my own not-for-profit organisation, Jump Start Foundation, to help kids who didn't have the same opportunities as some, to get educated.

And the building of this little library had been my most ambitious project yet.

I couldn't believe we'd finally finished it!

Soon after, I travelled back to my home in Sydney, where I lived with my husband, Ken, but got regular updates from Jen, who was a teacher at the school, about how much the kids were loving the library.

But just eight months later, a catastrophic cyclone hit the island, completely destroying not only the library, but many homes and local businesses.

"I have to get back there," I told Ken, devastated.

With the help of the Australian Defence Force, we rebuilt the library, replacing the roof, windows and door, to make it safe for the kids to enter.

Then I spent weeks helping locals get back on their feet.

In August 2015, I flew back, determined to equip the library with resources it

needed to become a learning environment again.

But just two days after I arrived, I was woken at midnight by a loud bang on the roof of the lodge I was staying in.

Leaping out of bed, I could smell fire and see smoke. I looked out the window and my heart hammered as ferocious flames licked around the surrounding lodges where my team, and the lodge owner, Hugh, were sleeping.

Then, I saw a gang of men running from their crime scene, with sticks of fire.

Racing outside barefoot and in my pyjamas, I hammered on Hugh's door. He came straight out and saw the growing inferno. "Evacuate!" he screamed over and over and everyone darted from their rooms, terrified.

Desperate to escape, all 23 of us trekked across the river to a neighbouring village, then scrambled up

a hill where we could see the devastation below. It was only then that we pieced together what had happened. There had been some local cultural conflict in the village that had nothing to do with us.

But the men I'd seen running away were intent on destruction and had been throwing petrol bombs at our accommodation.

The library remained intact but it was a miracle we'd all made it out alive.

Thankfully, someone had a phone, so we called the Australian Embassy.

Next morning, two planes arrived to take us to the safety of Port Vila, and from there I was flown back to Sydney.

Only as I sobbed in Ken's arms did the magnitude of what had happened hit me.

Ken and I had never had kids. I felt like a mother to the children of Tanna and in one despicable act, it felt like that part of my life had been destroyed. Plus, I'd been the leader of the project - the one in charge.

"I feel like it's all my fault," I wept to Ken.

While the rest of us had left, Hugh had stayed back, devastated but determined to rebuild his business.

We kept in touch and he

told me the local men who'd attacked us hadn't been caught.

"It's unlikely we'll ever get justice," he added.

The weeks and months that followed were hellish.

I suffered crippling insomnia, associating sleep with danger. If I did doze off, the tiniest sound would wake me and I'd be back in Tanna, amid that terrifying chaos.

"I think I need help dealing with this," I sobbed to Ken.

I saw a psychologist and she told me I had post-traumatic distress disorder.

We worked on techniques to help me sleep and she helped me understand that none of this was my fault.

"You need to let go of guilt and shame," she told me.

A year later, I was feeling more stable. And then in 2022, after a health scare, I made a decision.

"I need to go back to the island," I told Ken. "I need to close the loop on this story."

In September last year, I flew with Ken, my sister, and some friends for a holiday. We stayed in a resort in Port Vila as I didn't feel ready to head back to Tanna just yet.

But reconnecting with the island that had always meant so much to me was so healing. I laughed in the places I'd cried.

I'd always worked as a keynote speaker, but after what I'd been through, I started to gear my talks more towards resilience.

"Focus on the right gap," I tell my audiences.

What I mean by that is, lean into what your adversities have taught you, not what it has taken away. I now live by that every day.

"I need to go back to the island"



At the opening of the school library



The library after the cyclone



The terrifying night of the petrol bombing