

Children of Change

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“We have an obligation and a responsibility to invest in our children. We must make sure that children who have the grades, the desire and the will, but not money, can still get the best education possible.”

For a good cause

If you are from the outer islands such as Kadavu, Gau, Lau, Koro, Rotuma or even from the interior of Naitasiri and Namosi, than J Santa Ram Store is no strange name to you.

From humble beginnings in the village of Qarani in Gau, Mr and Mrs Santa Ram emerged from their general groceries and coconut oil making business to a large scale import and wholesale business today.

The family business was established in 1970 and has been serving not only the people from major urban areas but also the people from remote villages and outer islands of Fiji. Their 41 years of serving the country has not been an easy sailing. The company suffered total loss during the crisis of 2000.

“Just imagine everything in this store out there on the streets, the store was literally empty.” “Our trucks were found empty outside of Suva and our cash register among other looted stuff on the streets.” added Reshma Ram.

Many business operators that suffered similar fate called it quits. But for them, they packed it in and called it a new beginning. J Santa Ram Supermarket has increased its customer base and has a wider reach than any supermarket in Fiji. They established their own Education Relief Foundation to help the less fortunate known as, **“The Education Helpline.”** They offer funds for secondary and tertiary students who cannot afford an education.

“We believe that education is the only way for Fiji to move forward and educated people bring about unity because they are more aware and understanding. Living conditions could be much better, because they have good careers.” said Reshma Ram

At Fenc Fiji, we are grateful to all the staff and management of Santa Ram Stores for the generous donation of \$10,000 this year. This is their contribution for the second year running and will bring about long-term relief for children in need of educational assistance.



Mr Santa Ram flanked by Mr Mahen Raj and the chairperson, Mrs Teresa Apted

“We are fortunate for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children in our community who will be impacted by our contribution. It is a worthy cause and we are dedicated in pursuing this initiative,” Mr. Santa Ram.

A significant meaning of this gift is the partnership and understanding that it demonstrates on the part of a corporate agency. It sends a clear message to the mothers and children that they are not alone, that there are people who care. Thank you for contributing to the moral fibre of our community, giving hope to children and their families, even more, for your insight and appreciation of our mission as we help the poorest of the poor break the chains of generational poverty.



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Creating Opportunities



Vodafone WoD candidate, Edwin Sharma listen to Fr. Fergus explain their agriculture



Marist Champagnat Institute

Marist Champagnat Institute is a post-primary special needs school which caters for children who have either dropped out at primary or lower secondary levels of their education. Approximately 120 children attend the school as day scholars with a range of learning disabilities, and largely from poverty-stricken families.

In addition to developing their basic literacy skills, students are taught Vocational skills— small engine repairing, carpentry and joinery, tailoring and catering, office skills and agriculture.

Farming is done on a small scale with one hectare of land subdivided between **classes to cultivate. Student's plant vegetables of their choice and sell within the neighbourhood, sharing the profits on 60/40 basis with the school.** A savings scheme for children has been established with direct deposits into individual bank accounts.

Fenc Fiji, Vodafone ATH Fiji Foundation WOD Program candidate – Edwin Sharma, saw the need to expand the programme, initiating a farming plan for three hectares of land adjacent to the current garden. Planning for the farm project has commenced, engaging the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) and staff of the school. The proposed activity is intended to create opportunities for children at the school, leveraging on available resources and the assistance offered by MPI staff. It will engage some of FencFiji sponsored children more fully in developing farming skills which is already showing signs of success.

A Ray of Hope

“When we visit one child, we find another four” *Jasmine*

Visiting homes and documenting the living conditions of the poorest families is an important aspect of our work.

In the corner of a tin shack sat a young girl, observing, and intently listening to our conversation. Eventually she moved closer to her mother with tears in her eyes that told a journey of a hundred miles. Those tears had more to tell than what was visible to our staff. Milika had lost all hope of becoming a teacher. That tall dream came to an abrupt end when she was abused, traumatised and dropped out of school just a few months ago.

“I felt I had no future, so I gave up school. Not that I wanted to, but I felt I had no choice. My brother who is only 14, dropped out of school to work on sugar cane farms. **Sometimes he comes home with only \$26 for my mother.**” *Milika.*

Her father died at an early age, leaving behind a family desperate to make a living. After documenting the plight of this family, Milika was given a second chance. Thanks to all our sponsors, Milika is now at school and enjoying every moment of it. A counselling and mentoring programme was set up for her, bringing hope and protection for a child who struggled to survive the harsh realities of extreme poverty, abuse and trauma.

No child should ever endure such hardship; when it's every child's right to receive hope for a brighter future, an education, and to be protected from harm, disease and illness. Together, we can give them hope, education, love and protection.

*“Education
is the most
powerful
weapon
which you
can use to
change the
world.”*

Nelson Mandela



Magical Cocktail!!!



You've probably walked past people who are living on the streets or know a family that's having a tough surviving. Perhaps you've seen news reports about people who need assistance with basic needs. Sometimes you may wonder how people survive. At FENC Fiji, our volunteers have found a way to contribute towards the well-being of such people. The beautiful Thurston Gardens was the setting for a grand fundraising event organized by a passionate team of volunteers. Competitions, giveaways and a large outdoor screen for rugby enthusiasts were a few of the attractions that contribute to a successful event.

Team Jewel is a dynamic group of professionals, and students alike, committed to raising funds for FENC Fiji. The President of Fiji – Ratu Epeli Nailatikau was the chief guest for the evening whilst the Police Jazz Band played heart-throbbing music! Our very own, home grown Elvis captivated the audience with lively **Elvis numbers that got the crowd cheering..... more! more! more! You did us proud Elvis.**



Hibiscus Showcase

The Hibiscus Event held in Suva recently attracted people and organizations from across the country, comprising a mixture of civic organizations engaged in various fields of work including , human rights, trade, health, nutrition, farming, environment, and many more. Once more we set the stage to showcase our activities for children in partnership with Vodafone ATH Foundation .

“Our display of activities with facts and figures caught the attention of many individuals. Of particular interest to many, was the school dropout rates at early stages of education and our intervention strategy. One of the main attractions of showcasing our work is that it provides an important platform for networking opportunities and we used this chance to learn from each other and share best practices”. Edwin Sharma, Vodafone ATH Foundation W O D candidate.



Edwin with FENC Fiji display during the week long hibiscus festival.

“The goal of Education is the advancement of Knowledge and the dissemination of Truth.”
JFK

The culture of reading



If most kids today don't like reading, we often blame our culture. We often say that our culture is an oral culture, not a reading culture. This generalization, however, is not entirely correct. In fact, it is quite hard to see the correlation of cultural aspects and one's interest in reading.

Young kids are basically explorers. Recent studies in literacy development have revealed that children and adults take advantage of access to books they find enjoyable and interesting. They spend time reading to entertain themselves and not just to meet academic assignments.

A recent donation of 20 cartons of children's story books donated by the Rotaract Club of Suva helped start a reading corner for children at Levuka Library. Our volunteers – Vanisha and Patrick Vakaoti, enthusiastic readers, brought with them mats and cushions for the young toddlers.

Whether we are traveling in Europe, USA or Japan and most developed countries, it is not strange to see commuters in public transport like trains and buses spending their time reading books or magazines. But in Fiji we rarely find such a habit being practiced among our people. Most would prefer to doze off while traveling in public transport instead of reading. Why is it so?



“Helping children gain access to books both at school and at home is one way we can develop a reading culture. Another way includes parents and teachers serving as models, which is a necessary stimulus for children's literacy development.” Vanisha Vakaoti



Visit to the Manoca family



A newly built home for the Ram family

Smiles of happiness and joy were clearly visible on the faces of Ram children as we pulled up to their residence in Manoca Settlement. Their faces showed the happiness they now have in their new home.

The family once lived in a one-room tin shack with leaking roof and just one bed for over sixteen years. Our enthusiastic team of volunteers pulled down the tin shack and built a new home for the family. Remnants of the tin shack are still visible; a stark reminder of their past.

“We no longer get wet when it rains and my children feel comfortable in our new home. Now my husband and I can run our bean selling business. Whatever we earn each day, we buy food for our children.”

“When my children come home, they feel happy and do their homework. I want my children to learn and to do well at school.” Mrs Ram.



Children at Heart

Over the last few weeks, two of our volunteers – Monika Robinson and John Traill visited several homes to witness for themselves the progress of our sponsored children.

“Three significant things happened – children seemed to have grown since we first met them, they were more vocal, and they willingly shared their schooling experiences. To most children, attending school is part of their normal routine, but for some of these children entering school for the first time, the experience can be overwhelming. The time they spent telling us about their learning experiences, the friends they made and what they want to do, took us by surprise. The experience was great as we were able to converse with these children and their parents in an informal setting. Most parents were eager to tell us of the changes they witnessed in their children.”

“They are more orderly and take interest in school work. We can see a change in them. They talk about bigger things these days.” Parent.

“We also found, several of our sponsored children influenced by their peers – coercing them to skip school and engage in scrap metal collection. This is common among children living in informal settlements. To this we responded by engaging Community Police to take action, suggesting a monitoring process for children in these settlements.” Monika.





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Volunteering makes the difference

Some of the people that attend to you when you come to Fenc Fiji are volunteers. They are people who are passionate about helping others and getting out there to make the difference.

"Volunteering has given me an opportunity to change lives, including my own. Visiting homes, assessing cases and just listening to the poorest families has given me an understanding of families living on the verge of poverty and starvation – perhaps somewhere in between! To see a child smile when given the first pair of shoes is a moving experience. The joy of seeing such happiness is all that matters and you feel like doing more."

If you're feeling frustrated or overwhelmed by the news of a family in distress, volunteering to help can be a great way to cope with stress. Fenc Fiji was founded on the innovation, motivation and dedication of volunteers. Through the years, their commitment has continued to mould children nationwide into a community treasure. Today, as the Foundation grows to serve the poorest children, the need for dedicated volunteers has never been greater.

Education changes life

Brimming with overwhelming excitement, Ilisabeta made her way to her new school. It had been a long wait, and the previous night, she was restless, tossing and turning on the mat that served as her bed. Going to school was a new lease of life for her, a new beginning. A dream come true.

For a long eight years she had been denied the opportunity to receive an education. Her teacher in Class One had told **Ilisabeta's parents that she had a 'slow brain'. That she would need to attend a Special School. Ilisabeta's parents knew that it would be an expensive affair and they could not afford to send Ilisabeta to a Special School.**

Enrolling Ilisabeta at a Special School was a moment FencFiji volunteers will remember for a while. She was brimming with excitement.

The changes in Ilisabeta have been quite visible according to her mother.

"After her usual household chores, she reads and studies her notes from school. She is showing signs of growing up. She does the household chores without being told and cares for her younger brother."

At Fenc Fiji, our volunteers often find children who have dropped out of school for many reasons. Ilisabeta, surely, is

making good use of our sponsorship.

"Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource."