

Teaching children resilience

Helping students hula-hoop through trauma and change

By Kim Triegaardt

Imagine wrapping a rock up in sponges to make a soccer ball? For the children in displacement camps in Syria they don't have to imagine, that's what they do.

Former St Mary's College principal Bernadette Stockman came across this unorthodox sporting equipment during her research into how she could use her education skills to help children in these camps.

In early 2019 Bernadette was on the return trip from Everest base camp in Nepal, heading back to a school in Khumjung Nepal, when word of Covid filtered through the local tea houses. Her plan to spend the next few years volunteering was suddenly thwarted and she hurried home.

Back in Auckland, Bernadette still wanted to volunteer.

"I was already familiar with ReliefAid, an aid organisation founded in New Zealand, and the work they do in displacement camps in Syria, so I



decided to find a way to be useful to them," she says.

At the end of 2019 in war-torn Syria, an estimated 2.45 million children, or one in three, were not in school. "I discovered many of these camps don't even have schools. It was important then to put something together that would be beneficial to the children, if and when they ever got to school."

Bernadette found that children also had no toys as there was often



neither the time nor space to bring anything when the families fled the conflict around them.

"The children were making soccer balls out of rocks wrapped in sponge and cars out of old sardine cans."

Bernadette developed a programme called BounceBack4Syria designed to build resilience in children, and which featured... hula-hoops.

"Resilience is about bouncing back when you fail at something.

So, the fact that you can't get the hula-hoop to go around your waist, and you are able to keep trying, means you learn to cope until you succeed."

"Also, there is so much more you can do with a hula-hoop. You can roll it; you can throw it at a target. You can extend yourself and keep getting better at things, with just a hoop."

ReliefAid helped Bernadette run a pilot project into the camps in April in 2020 delivering soccer balls, hula-hoops, skipping ropes and sensory balls.

Bernadette fundraised the \$3,000 needed to put together kits for 50 families with help from students at St Mary's College, the New Zealand Olympic Education Committee, and also New Zealand Olympian hockey player Sam Charlton.

The pilot project was a huge success. "It was just incredible to see the joy on the faces of the children in the photos and videos we received back.

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Smiling faces as members of the ReliefAid team hand out toys to the camp children.

“On the day ReliefAid delivered the toys, 13-year old Fatima was so excited she could hardly sit still. She told the team, “I felt so happy when we got them and I tried to put the hula-hoop on my waist and make it turn without falling to the ground.”

Bernadette and ReliefAid organised another round of funding and completed a second distribution of toys in November 2021. Although this time Bernadette asked for something extra to be added to the programme.

“I wanted to add value to the programme so we engaged two people to work in the camp with the children. The children get the same kit but the adults will actually organise play sessions and incorporate the message of resilience

with the children and their parents,” she says.

“When children are left in a vacuum, it is bad enough they miss out on education, but for kids traumatised by war, long empty days with nothing to fill them takes a huge toll on their physical and mental wellbeing. This is where the programme has real impact, as well as strengthening the children so they are better prepared for what they come up against in the future.”

Founder and Executive Director ReliefAid Mike Seawright says the organisation was thrilled by Bernadette’s offer to help.

“When your home has been bombed and your family displaced, the future



Even the ordinary old hula-hoop can teach lots of useful lessons.

of your kids is bleak. Education sparks hope of a brighter future ahead. It has been rewarding to see the impact of this programme on parents, children, and our team in Syria.

“It has provided a much-needed positive focus, whilst developing new skills and giving families reasons to laugh again.”

While children in Syria are dealing with significant, and often traumatic, change, Bernadette says these lessons in resilience would work for New Zealand children as well.

“The circumstances for our children here might not be as dire,” says Bernadette, “but building resilience is important so they can face challenging times.

Anything that helps a child cope better is important.”

Because funding is always the key challenge for these programmes, especially since after 10 years the conflict in Syria never makes the headlines, ReliefAid hope to engage students in New Zealand schools to take action.

If you are looking for a way for your school to be involved in a humanitarian aid project, Bernadette would be excited to talk through potential opportunities. She can be contacted at Bernadette.stockman@reliefaid.org.nz. More information about the work ReliefAid is doing can be found at: www.reliefaid.org.nz.

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