



Eaglehawk Primary School
Church St, Eaglehawk
Phone: 5446 3722

MEDIA RELEASE

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Monday March 24, 2003*

East Timor First Lady Returns Home to Launch Victoria-Wide Friendship Schools Project

The First Lady of East Timor and former Bendigo resident Kirsty Sword Gusmão will today officially launch the 'Friendship Schools Project' – a program which aims to foster links between schools in East Timor and Australia – at Eaglehawk Primary School, Church St Eaglehawk.

The launch is a very symbolic occasion, recognising the links between Eaglehawk Primary and schools in East Timor as well as the links between the Sword family and the Eaglehawk community, Ms Sword Gusmão said.

According to acting Eaglehawk School Principal, Heather Ridge, Eaglehawk Primary formalised their assistance to East Timor six months ago, establishing a link with Balibar Primary School, situated approximately 10 kilometres south of Dili.

"Balibar was completely destroyed by the militias in 1999 and we wanted to help the school rebuild. We also wanted to establish ties between the schools and the students.

"The exchange of letters and photographs between students has been just as important as sending material aid. It's been a very rewarding experience," Ms Ridge said.

Kirsty Sword Gusmão said: "The relationship that has developed will now provide a model for a Victoria-wide program seeking to link schools across the state to schools in East Timor."

It will be run by Kirsty's Alola Foundation and eventually plans to establish across Australia and will involve:

- The delivery of material assistance such as school furniture and equipment
- Fundraising to help East Timor's schools rebuild infrastructure
- Exchange of letters and photographs between students
- Student and teacher exchanges.

The formal establishment of a Friendship Schools Program will have a big impact on the education system in East Timor, Ms Sword Gusmão explained.

"Between 80 and 90% of schools were completely destroyed in the post-referendum violence of September 1999. When schools reopened, students lacked basic writing materials such as pens and papers. There are few teaching materials and student-teacher ratios are very high.

"With connections made between schools will help establish a stronger education system in East Timor. This is the key to the country's future," Ms Sword Gusmão said.

She added a personal note: " My father was a principal at Eaglehawk Primary and my mother a music teacher in the 1970s. It was a very happy time for my family and we are very proud to retain life-long friends here," Ms Sword Gusmão said.

"Eaglehawk has never been a wealthy community, but its generosity and spirit is something that has stayed with me. Launching the Alola Foundation Friendship Schools Program from Eaglehawk Primary School is a very special event," Ms Sword Gusmao said.

Heather Ridge said, "Kirsty's father Brian had a huge impact on our students, the staff and our community. His spirit remains at the school and in our programs. His passion for education can also be seen in Kirsty's work in East Timor. That is something we are very proud and honoured to be involved in."

Any schools interested in learning more about this program can contact the Alola Foundation via email: alola@easttimor.minihub.org.

FACTS ABOUT EDUCATION IN EAST TIMOR

- 80-90% of school buildings and related infrastructure were destroyed during the violence of September 1999
- Teaching materials, school records and furniture were stolen and destroyed.
- There are 700 government school, 173 Catholic schools and 26 private schools in East Timor.
- There are more than 185,000 students enrolled in primary schools
- At the primary school level, the teacher/student ratio averages 62 students per teacher.
- The fact that many parents are uneducated (and therefore do not appreciate the value of education) coupled with poor educational facilities and standards of teaching means attendance levels are generally low.
- Approximately 43% of the East Timorese are under the age of 15 years.

ENDS

ALL MEDIA ARE INVITED TO ATTEND THE LAUNCH

WHERE: Eaglehawk Primary School, Church St, Eaglehawk. Monday March 24: 9.00am-12.30pm

PROGRAM: includes a visit with students, morning tea with staff and parents, viewing of a video from East Timor, a speech by Kirsty and maypole dance. The school choir and Angklung orchestra will provide entertainment.

FOR PHOTO-OPS and INTERVIEWS with Kirsty or further information, please contact Lara McKinley on 0429 911 322.