

# Tribute to Gail Clifford

Mana Gail Clifford lived for many years in the Blue Mountains and was a key member of the Blue Mountains East Timor Sisters (BMETS). Always deeply passionate about Timor-Leste, Gail spent many years working there as an Australian Volunteer International (AVI) as well as a self funded volunteer and an activist and organiser here in Australia.

Gail passed away in 2017.

**Below are excerpts of the obituary from her funeral, focused on her work in Timor.**

It's an honour to speak about Gail. Gail asked me to speak today about her and Timor-Leste, the small country that captured her heart. Gail loved Timor and Timor loved Mana Gail.

Today I represent Blue Mountains East Timor Sisters as well as the many Timorese who Gail touched. You will have seen the outpourings of love on Facebook. This is not at all surprising – though Gail would have been surprised I am sure.

How did this love affair with Timor start? Gail fell for Timor after she was appointed the Timor-Leste project officer for Leichhardt City Council in 2000. Captured during a trip to Maliana in 2002, Gail returned to Timor self-funded to spend 3 months working with TB patients at Klibur Domin. Still smitten and not daunted by the hardship she witnessed first hand, when Gail moved to Blackheath, she joined up with BMETS and in 2005 quickly agreed to accompany a bunch of us to Timor. I was in that group of wide-eyed newbies – awkward and leaning on experienced, savvy Gail who could chat impressively to kids in the street, navigate potholed roads with confidence, who knew heaps.

BMETS have continued, Gail right centre – garage and book sales, stalls, community talks, tais exhibitions – raising over 1 million. Gail was always there – cheerfully attending meetings and tirelessly lifting boxes, sorting junk, spruiking raffle tickets – all with immense goodwill, there for the set up and there for the ugly clean up. She was ever reliable and always good fun!



And in Timor itself.

Gail had 3 stints as a volunteer under the AVI program. From 2010 to 2012, Gail worked in Maliana in the biblioteka, the library. She arrived to find a muddle of useless texts in Portuguese and English (and a couple in Tetun), a decrepit building with no water or power, no staff, no local committee, no library users. By the end of her placement, the library was staffed by Maun Adelio and Mana Helena who were professional and confident, it had well organised books and heaps of library users, literacy programs outreaching to outlying areas, walls brightened with murals. This week, Mana Helena said, "She was most like a sister and mother to all of us". The President of Bobonaro, Senor Zeferino dos Santos wrote, "She is very talented. She is an honest person, humble and hard working". The Maliana Biblioteka's doors are still open, activities still relevant – this is a real achievement.

In 2014, following her first brush with cancer, Gail returned to Timor for placement number 2 – teaching English to diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here Gail gained a following of students who knew that they could actually learn from her, that she understood how to address the barriers they faced in improving their language skills.

Having supported young artists at Arte Moris over the years, it was right that Gail committed in 2016 to working with the artist's collective, Gembel. Gail had a vision of these artists making a real living from their passion and she knew just how to assist them. Gembel is going strong now – Gail's placement with them might have been unfortunately cut short but her legacy is apparent when you walk through the door.

Over the years, Gail made numerous self-funded trips to Timor, many of these with her daughter. Only last year, in between chemo treatments, Gail stayed with me and my partner, spending her days visiting her mates in Maliana, travelling to Hatobuilico, assisting with submissions, sorting out banking – tireless and always talking, talking Timor.

But Gail did not talk up her achievements. That is up to us.

I would love to be able to stand and talk about Gail today with Timorese she knew well (Tony Amaral and Ego Lemos), Timorese she mentored (Maun Adelio and Maun Aboko), Timorese she shared a home with (Mana Lourdes), Timorese she treated as extended family (Alin sira Eva and Domingas, Maun Antonio, Mana Beba), Timorese who recognised her as special (Frater Acacio).

Gail was special, a stand out! Why? Not because she put herself forward or considered herself as special. Not at all! Gail never wanted to be the star!

These are some of the words that have been used to describe Gail this week:

**Authentic** – Gail was simply herself, genuine, real, kind, thoughtful.

**Generous**- she gave of herself, her heart, her time, her money and she never wanted anything back.

**Loyal** – Gail stuck with people and stuck with Timor. She stuck with the many young students that she assisted with fees, transport costs, food.

**Inclusive** – Gail held hands with people across the divide of the ditch, Timorese from rural areas and Dili, across classes and opportunities.

Hey! I wanted a neat round up that summed Gail up – and I have it.

## **G A I L**

**G** for generosity ... genuine, good, gracious, gorgeous

**A** for Authenticity

**I** for Inclusiveness

**L** for Loyalty, loving, loved and Legacy.

Legacy – boy, does she have one! We love you Mana Gail! Rest up now.