

Buk bilong Pikinini:
Drusilla Modjeska talks to Anne-Sophie Hermann

Meanjin, Vol 72, No 1, March 2013

In a small room at the Papua New Guinea High Commission in Canberra, Anne-Sophie Hermann sorts books. A security guard helps me carry in another box to add to those already overflowing every surface and piled on the floor. These are books donated to *Buk bilong Pikinini*, the organisation Hermann started five years ago while she was in Port Moresby as the wife of the Australian High Commissioner to PNG. Starting from the simple premise of bringing books to the most vulnerable of Papua New Guinea's children, the first library opened in a ward of the Port Moresby General Hospital. That was in April 2008. In December 2012 the tenth library opened near a settlement on the outskirts of the town of Alotau in Milne Bay Province. From a small start, in a country where half the children are out of school, and where good ideas do not easily translate into development success, *BbP's* libraries now bring books and literacy to thousands of children.

I visited two of the libraries in September 2012. The rooms were modest, with the children sitting bunched together on the mats spread, traditional style, on the floor. There were a few shelves of books and craft materials, cut-outs hanging from the ceiling, posters and children's drawings pinned to the wall. Compared to the facilities you'd see in primary schools in Australia, they are modest. In Papua New Guinea I've seen few classrooms for young children with as much, and many with a great deal less. What moved me—other visitors, I'm told have the same reaction—was to see how eager and inventive the children were, and how much they made of everything the libraries provide. 'We are probably the only libraries in the world', Hermann says, 'with lines of children outside.'

In November last year I went to Canberra to meet Anne-Sophie Hermann. With a recorder on the table between us I asked her to take me back to the beginning, when, at the end of 2006, she and her husband arrived in Port Moresby where he was to take up his post as Australian High Commissioner.

'With my husband's position,' she said, 'we lived in a lovely residence on top of a hill and we had a number of staff. I had with me my then fourteen-month-old daughter who was wanting to play with everybody—and she did. The children would come into the house, and they would play with everything that Yasmin had, but I found that they were leaning towards the books. When I sat down to read to Yasmin, they were the first to snuggle up next to me and be very interested. I asked them what kind of books they had at home, because they were living just behind

us—those families would have been living with the Australian High Commissioner for over twenty years so I thought they would represent middle class with regular incomes and secure housing—but the children said no, they didn't have any books at home. So I said, well let's go down and find a public library where we can sit and read together, and where we can get some books, as a lot of books that I had for my daughter were in Danish because I'm from Denmark. And they said, there is no library, and I was shocked. There used to be libraries in Port Moresby. Before Independence there were more than thirty public libraries across the country. There is the National Library, which was being refurbished while we were there, but it is still quite a struggling library and it sits in a location where people don't have easy access. I've never seen a child there.

'So this is what I found, and each day one of Yasmin's little friends—our gardener's daughter, Frida—would come in and say, "Anne-Sophie, could I please have a story?" So that was really the beginning, the friendship between Yasmin and Frida and their love for books.'

As the wife of the Australian High Commissioner—'an extremely privileged role'—Hermann had access to 'everybody': government ministers, business communities, NGOs. 'Accepting invitations that are not only traditional diplomatic functions was important,' she said. 'It's from the smallest of projects that you get to know people. I'm not a believer in the tradition of distance.'

She bluntly says that she could not have begun *BbP* without the authority of that role. But on its own it was not enough. It was one thing to see the need and have the idea, but another to find a framework that would translate the idea into a project that could last beyond her and her husband's posting. 'You can't just donate books,' she said. 'You have to have someone who can read to the children. And you have to have someone who can foster that love, because if books have been missing from the culture then how are you going to know what to do with these books?'

Various organisations, she learned, had sent more than a million books to PNG over the years, but 'donated in variety of locations, without an organised framework, and often in a very sad condition', it's been a largely wasted gesture. I've seen some of those boxes myself, with Italian cookbooks in them, even guides to walks around Sydney. 'Why should Papua New Guineans have rubbish?' Hermann asks. 'It makes absolutely no sense.'

The framework came when she met Anna Mukerjee, the wife of the UNICEF representative. 'Anna had had previous experience in developing countries, which I had none of—she had been posted to Africa and had seen various projects so had some sort of idea of how to go about things.' Together they came up with the model of the libraries and put the idea to their contacts in the business community. 'I guess it made sense to them,' Hermann said, 'because PNG was doing very well, and still is, with an annual growth of up to 10 per cent per annum. The businesses were enjoying the mining boom, so it was a good time for them to do some projects that could help the community. I guess the concept appealed, and very quickly we got financial help to do what we wanted to do.'

Buk bilong Pikinini was established as an organisation early in 2007, a matter of months after Hermann had arrived in PNG. 'It was certainly very quick.' In April 2008 the first library opened at the Port Moresby General Hospital in a ward for children with life-threatening illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis on the brain.

'Anna and I had to sit down and think: where are we going to put that first library? On the scale of needs, my goodness where to start.' With controlled

medication impossible in the villages, those children could be in that ward for up to a year. 'Knowing that all PNG hospitals are overcrowded, we asked if we could set up in the far left corner somewhere not taking up much more space than one hospital bed. The hospital board agreed. So we spent many hours in that ward doing everything ourselves. We would paint the toy boxes at home and get the library books ready, sorting and everything. We used the Dewey system so everything was colour-coded by age group and we would laminate and cut out, and hang out posters. I spent a lot of hours in that hospital, and opening that library was the biggest sense of pride for me.'

Since the library opened, one of the doctors has described children who were once bored and dispirited as now hardly able to wait for the medical staff to finish their morning rounds so they can run to the library.

The next library was established five months later in a small former Red Cross school for disabled children. Again it was established on the basis of greatest need. 'Seeing a school like that was amazing because in PNG, as you know, children with disabilities are very often stigmatised and kept at home.' The school was underfunded, and with most of the children hearing impaired it couldn't afford sign-language books that 'can cost up to \$50 a piece'. With more fundraising events and another small grant, *BbP* was able to buy the specialised material the school needed, and to Hermann's joy, that library now has as its head librarian a young man who was himself a student there, assisted by a fully hearing teacher.

The next big step for *BbP* came in July 2009 when their third library was opened adjacent to the Lawes Road medical centre. Unlike the first two libraries, which had a more or less stable and predictable population of children, this was the first to open to children from the nearby settlements. 'This changed everything,' Hermann said.

'We started to understand what the administration of the project meant. We had to be very clear on our communication and expectations. We had to develop a true syllabus because with the library open to settlement children came the numbers. We grew very fast. We needed the head librarian and the teacher-assistants to fully understand their roles, and fully understand the type of learning that *BbP* was developing. We wanted to make sure that this was an early childhood play-based learning program.'

From the start, *BbP* has taken 'the best teachers', Hermann said. 'We source them from the teachers colleges. We don't take librarians as such even though we call our staff teacher-librarians. Often a library will be brimming with children—there might be fifty or seventy-five children to two teachers. We have developed a syllabus that only a teacher would be able properly to follow. Every week of the year has a letter, every week of the year has a number, and every week of the year has an Awareness in which we introduce the children to important issues in society. We cover hygiene and illnesses, and also things like the environment, respect for your elders, kindness, your country, your history.

'We do Global Hand Washing Day, for example, which the children love because people from Palmolive come and there'll be a guy dressed as a big octopus who will do hand-washing for a about fifty kids at a time, and they can all take soap home. They have a great time while learning really important messages. From our monitoring and evaluation using the Most Significant Change method we're learning that the hygiene messages are really coming through and are empowering the children with information to take back to their families. In a country where there is tuberculosis and cholera this is vital. We love having an audience with big

flopped-out ears! One mother has said to us that she now has hopes for the future of her children and for herself. They have plans. I think it was Kofi Annan who said that literacy is a bridge from misery to hope.'

Now with a staff of forty, and with the various components of the syllabus designed to complement each other, organising *Buk bilong Pikinini* has become 'quite a bit of work'. There are now seven libraries in Port Moresby that are open to the public, and three in the provincial towns of Goroka, Lae and Alotau. 'Every January we run a big training program and thanks to Air New Guinea we are able to fly all teachers into Port Moresby and we train them in Jolly Phonics [the internationally recognised phonetic literacy program] and in the Literacy, Numeracy and Awareness program that we are going to be focusing on for the year to come. So everything is planned a year ahead. Although *BbP* is in a constant state of development, every January we set the program for the year.'

The first library I visited was the one at Lawes Road, in a modest structure alongside the health centre. Inside were sixty children or more, aged between five and eight. They were calling out the letters and making the movements as the teacher-librarian held up the cards. It was 'p' that morning, and there were a lot of happy popping sounds. A girl of about eight read her favourite book to the class. It was one of the few written for the children of PNG, a story about a village dating from the 1960s. The girl stood tall and read in a soft, firm voice. She is one of the children who will benefit from the *BbP* sponsorship program that started in 2011 to assist settlement children move across to the education system.

At that library and the next I visited, a larger one at Koki Market with a hundred children or so, a good half of them were girls. This is a considerable achievement in a country where, as Hermann says, 'very often girls are kept at home to do chores and help their mothers who work extremely hard. All research shows that if you educate the woman, you educate the whole family.'

The education of girls is a major problem in Papua New Guinea, and *BbP* is 'keenly aware' of it. Another is that children, boy or girl, often don't go to school until they are eight or nine years old. *BbP*'s evaluation program confirms that 'learning actually drops during that period. They are missing a crucial window of opportunity if children do not have that early access to learning and literacy opportunity. It's important to get in with fun projects like the Jolly Phonics and with our societal issues.' But in PNG play-based early childhood education is 'a concept that is non-existent'; it is not used in schools, it's not a part of the education system. 'It's in the PNG constitution that every child has the right to learn to read and write, but it is not translated into budgetary terms and put into a government budget.'

Approximately half of PNG's school-age children are out of school at any one time, 'which amounts to about 700,000 children'. Hermann estimates that most of this is due to cost, and the rest to girls being kept at home. Fees have made attendance impossible for large families in settlements and rural areas. When there is money for school, it is usually boys who are first given the chance.

I asked how much the situation had changed since Prime Minister Peter O'Neill's recent announcement that fees are to be removed.

'What he has done is ambitious,' Hermann replied, 'but it's going to be a work in progress, not an instant solution. Even though he has taken some fees off, others remain. So it's still a bridge too far for some families. There is also the issue of transport to school, which is not a guarantee either. We saw this at our Nine Mile Library, where the children and their community were the most welcoming we've ever seen. At its opening [in August 2012] the community leader gave a speech

saying that even if they could scrape the money together and send the children to school, it would be impossible because for them the nearest schools are four buses away.'

So what is *BbP*'s relationship to the education department?

'Our relationship with the Department of Education has now been reinforced thanks to our partnership with AusAID. From the beginning, we invited officials from the department to the libraries, and we have gone to brief them. We make it clear we are not a school, we do not provide certificates. We are preparing the children, we are giving them access to the tools of literacy, which are books, pencils, crayons, paper, everything. They have looked at us and are now becoming very interested and because of our recommendation might also invest in Jolly Phonics packs for the schools. We are finding the children learn to read and write very quickly. The children love doing the phonics because they are jolly and they make the sound but they also make the body movement—for "S" they shake like a snake so it's fun. We've also had links with the PNG Advisory Group on National Education. One of our staff members, Elizabeth Omeri, is now the vice-chair and she is pushing for early childhood learning in all the schools.'

The Minister for Community Development, Toni Loujaya—one of the three women elected to parliament in 2012 and also a poet—has recently announced funding for libraries in Morobe Province, one of the least developed areas in terms of literacy. In 2012 *BbP* also signed a partnership agreement with World Vision. 'They found that in their programs the education aspect was somewhat weak,' Hermann says, 'and so they have asked us to provide that for them. We are going to be establishing four libraries inside Port Moresby settlements. Usually we establish libraries next to a settlement, but inside is going to be a whole different ball park.' They have also signed a partnership agreement with Transparency International, which, like AusAID's good governance program *Strongim Pipol Strongim Nesen*, will also strengthen and expand *BbP*'s Awareness program.

So what has made *BbP* work so well in a country where many a well-intentioned project falls into the ground?

'First of all, without knowing it, the model was right—that you have to have those books in an organised framework, and that you have to have people introduce those books to the children. Next, it was important not to expect people to come to us, but for us go to where the people are. Then, we didn't create a barrier by saying there are rules—you don't have to be quiet as in a library—it's an open-door policy where everyone is welcome. We invite the families in and tell them what's going on. It's a model of openness and it's a model where there is room for everybody.

'The reason why *Buk bilong Pikinini* found the financial support to get to where it is now is that everyone could see the logic of reading to children, of giving them the opportunity that books bring. It was a simple idea, and when [potential sponsors] visit they see that the children have shown us their trust. That's what communicates to people. It shows that any child, regardless of their background, should have equal access. Some days some of the libraries take two or three hundred children in. We have statistics showing average attendance of between 15,000 and 20,000 visits per month with about 10,000 books lent out per month. That was before the tenth library had opened. The children want it. That's what inspires me. It was also why we very quickly acquired a committee of volunteers which was instrumental in making it happen. This committee has now been replaced by a professionally staffed head office in Port Moresby and a board of directors which includes Dame Carol Kidu.'

And the difficulties?

‘The first big problem was shipping, because it is very expensive to ship anything into PNG. That was solved by a *BbP* committee member who worked for a freight company and was able to negotiate for us to get free shipping.’ The only time Hermann felt she couldn’t do what was required, she says, was when she had to argue with PNG Customs every time, ‘and they would change their rules, require a new set of documentation or whatever. Once we overcame that I knew we could become a sustainable project. Free shipping was the key.

‘Other things to overcome were the perceptions of people who said, well, PNG is not a country of readers, it’s a country of talkers. Sometimes people in the communities would say, what’s the point of the library, why do we need a library? Explaining that has been quite an interesting conversation, but after seeing the libraries and the effect on the children of a few months of attendance, they fully embrace what we are doing—and want more. Which has now led us to our adult literacy program. We have seen microcosms developing around our libraries, where mothers will be selling products outside in a little economic climate that we had not planned or counted on.

‘At Koki Markets we’ve had the opportunity to re-establish a community library with adult books downstairs from the children’s library. The mothers came into that library and sat looking at the books without being able to read them, so we thought, okay, we have always tried not to dilute our mission by venturing into other projects, but why don’t we see if we can provide *Buk bilong Papa Mama* to the communities. So this is a syllabus we are working on. We are running a pilot at the moment and we have, I think, seventeen mammas. The men let the women go first, and when they’ve watched what they do there, they begin to come along too!’

Ironically, the biggest problem *BbP* faces now is to source enough books to stock the libraries that are coming on stream. Two are under construction and twenty are expected to open in the next five years. *BbP* has good support for infrastructure, staff and syllabus development, but can they get enough quality books? They have found it much harder to find donor publishers. Hence the boxes of books from individual supporters that Hermann sorts at the PNG High Commission in Canberra. The High Commissioner and patron of *BbP*, His Excellency Charles Lepani, made it possible for Hermann to continue her work when her husband’s posting finished and they returned to Canberra.

Hermann collects as much as she can from Australia, and is especially happy when she receives books from Aboriginal writers with stories and animals similar to those in PNG. Oxford University Press is a generous donor and has sponsored half a library. ‘We would welcome more publishers,’ Hermann says, ‘to help us with books that will develop the libraries to become inspiring and meaningful learning centres. In PNG the only new books you can find come from India and China, and are sometimes are not quite suited to the local culture.’

A related problem is that there are few children’s books written by Papua New Guineans for Papua New Guinean children, and those that are available tend to be of poor quality and very expensive. Nonetheless, *BbP* uses everything there is because of ‘the culture and outlook that books bring.

‘During literacy week and book week, we encourage the children to write their own stories. They are immensely inspirational, really interesting and funny, and sometimes they are very revealing of personal situations. Giving the children an opportunity to tell their stories and to read them out loud is important. It’s important for them to know that their own culture is important, and books are just

not about everybody else's culture.' It is her ambition to find a way to publish these stories, and to interest Australian children's writers as well as PNG writers to work with *BbP*.

Hermann also believes that Australian children should have opportunities to learn from the stories of PNG children. 'One of the things I like about PNG', she says, 'is how basic concepts can be so different and how we can learn from that, and understand that Western ideas are not always right—for instance concepts of time. We Western people are very excitable, we come in and say this, and this, and we speak very fast, and this has to happen now. That's our way of doing things, whereas in PNG they say, well we will do this when that tree is that big, and you start thinking, that's interesting because how do you know how fast that tree is going to grow? Actually everything grows very fast in PNG so it's not as slow as people sometimes think. Papua New Guineans are able to adapt in ways that we could never adapt, and can be extremely inventive with very little.'

The same could be said of *Buk bilong Pikinini*.

This interview is adapted from a longer version that can be found on the Meanjin website.

Anne-Sophie Hermann wishes to acknowledge the support of BbP patrons Hon Richard Marles, Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, and the great Bart Philemon, former member for Lae and member of every government in PNG for the past twenty years.

For a full list of libraries and information on how to donate, visit www.bukbilongpikinini.org