



My story

Working with Many Hands International and Australian volunteer Lucia Pichler, 2011-2015.

Thomas Lopes, Health Promotion Officer, Many Hands International



Thomas as project interpreter, January 2011

In early 2011, I met Gillian Howell, an artist from Australia in the English language course in Esperansa Community Centre in Lospalos, Timor-Leste. Gillian led a community music project in my town, working with a number of young people from Australia who were very talented in music. One of them that I now know well is flute player Lina Andonovska. They asked me to look for a group of young people who might enjoy playing music from local traditional instruments. I invited them to my home village Kakavei where we introduced music that is played by using tools such as plastic bottles, bamboo and others that generally can be

found in the local village. Young people in Kakevei

really enjoyed this event and also the friendship shown by the Australian musicians. Gillian introduced me to Australian researcher Kim Dunphy. Kim invited me to be her research assistant for two weeks, as she did interviews for her PhD research. Working with Kim, I got interested in Australian people because of the hospitality and friendship they showed me.



A year later Dr Kim invited me to work with her in an NGO she and her colleague Holly Schauble founded in Lospalos. I accepted this opportunity to work for Many Hands International because of the friendship that we had already and because I had enjoyed meeting other Australians. I started working for Many Hands three days a week as a translator in February 2012. My duties included translating documents and data collected by our research team documenting the endangered cultural heritage of the Fataluku people. I enjoyed the work as a translator because I wanted to learn English. Through this work I began to develop my English language skills.

In early 2013, Australian volunteer Lucia Pichler came to join us on the research project. Over several months working with Lucia, I increasingly felt that the working environment was very pleasant, and I also learned about how to complete a job independently without having to continuously ask for instructions. We also saw how Lucia set an example of working professionally with high standards. She also advanced a creative work culture which she demonstrated through her work every day.

In November 2013, I met with Professor John Toumbourou, who I later discovered was a Chair in the School of Psychology at Deakin University in Australia. He visited Lospalos because his wife Dr. Kim Dunphy was dedicating her time and knowledge researching the

endangered cultural heritage of Fataluku in Lospalos. In a short conversation with Professor John, I tell him about social problems faced by the people in our community. I told him about the high rate of tobacco use among young people in Lospalos, (later I discovered that Timor Leste has the highest tobacco users in the world). He listened attentively. At the end of our meeting Professor John asked me what my career goals were.

Early in 2014, I was appointed to a new position at Many Hands as a Health Promotion Officer, my career dream. My task was to develop a strategy to overcome tobacco use among young people in my home town. This project was initiated by Professor John Toumbourou. The first phase of the project was training. Professor John, through the School of Psychology provide a financial support for my training for three months in Australia. The training included academic English and basic research techniques. In June 2014, I returned to Lospalos and initiated a consultation with government officials in the District Lautem to determine strategies to overcome high tobacco use among young people. Initially I felt this project may not be implemented because of my limitations. Again Lucia Pichler was an outstanding motivator. Lucia continued to give support to me that enabled the project to eventually be successful.



Thomas with colleagues (Ministries of Education, Health, Deakin University, WHO) at the first meeting he organised to establish the National Alliance for the Prevention of Tobacco, November 2014

I also want to thank Professor John Toumbourou, Dr. Kim Dunphy, Chris Loughnan, Amy Stevenson, Judd Zekkas, Tim Ballagh, and all the good people of Australia as well as Many Hands International staff in Timor Leste which has incredible unspeakable contribution for the establishment of a national anti-tobacco alliance that will work hard to overcome the socio-economic and health problems caused by tobacco.

At a farewell party at the beach at Com we let Lucia know that she will not be forgotten. We said, 'Goodbye Lucia, congratulations for starting a new chapter in your life, and for your contributions in taking part in a small change in Timor-Leste that has meant so much us'. We will tell Timorese people that we meet wherever we go about Lucia. Lucia was a great friend, a humble person, willing to work very hard to learn about the language and culture of Lospalos. She was thoughtful and very friendly not only to MHI staff but also their families.

Thomas Lopes health@manyhands.org.au, Lospalos, December 16, 2015

At first, this program was only implemented in Lautem, but with Lucia supervision and dedication in sharing her skills with me, I successfully established a civil society organisation, the National Alliance for Tobacco Control. This consists of many NGOs who want to work together to achieve a Timor-Leste that is free from tobacco smoke. I was very proud and pleased to represent Timor-Leste at a WHO meeting on non-communicable diseases in India in July 2015.



MHI staff & volunteers November 2015: Cesario Lourdes, Lucia Pichler, Kim Dunphy, John Toumbourou, Khey Gandara, Lina Andonovska, Thomas Lopes