

## Travel Tales

# Miss Vanuatu Cheers Up Children at Hospital

Valerie Martinez Brings Needed Gifts, Supplies and Love to Childrens' Ward

By Lew Toulmin

I have been fortunate to have spent some time recently with the new Miss Vanuatu, Valerie Martinez, whom I interviewed last month and the month before.

Recently she brought a much-needed ray of sunshine into the Childrens' Ward at Vila Central Hospital (VCH) on Assumption Day, when she organized a visit by a team of twenty co-workers from QBE Insurance.

The volunteers distributed toys and supplies, and spend time with each of the sick children.

VCH is the only hospital in this entire country of 250,000, and unfortunately it does not have a great reputation. Expats who have any kind of serious problem are immediately evacuated to Australia or New Zealand, each five hours away, instead of going to the hospital here.

Valerie said, "When I was a little girl of nine, I had an operation at VCH, and I remember being very bored and tired, waiting to get better. So I want to cheer up the children in the ward today, and give them hope."

This kind of activity is quite important, according to Dr. Sale Vurobaravu, a VCH doctor, who said that, "Children are unique patients. They need play and mental stimulation to help them get better.



*The youngest patient in the children's ward*

Medical staff can tend to clinical needs, but we don't have enough time to work and play with the kids, so this volunteer effort is very useful."

The hospital visit included a series of songs led by Seventh Day Adventist Alan Stevens of QBE, including "This Little Light of Mine," "He's Able," and "Jesus Loves Me."

QBE General Manager Shane Schneider made a short speech, in which he stated that, "Valerie had this fantastic idea of helping children in hospital, and we are backing her up. We hope to do even more in the future, and I will be encouraging General Managers and CEOs of other companies to work on this effort and other projects with Valerie."

Valerie Martinez said that, "I want to keep coming back to the hospital and working with these great kids. We will bring more needed supplies like we did today, including boxes of blankets and diapers." She also has other projects in mind. "We need a 'green' Port Vila with no trash, that welcomes visitors and residents alike. I want to lead an effort to clean up the rubbish beside the roads here in town and across the country."



*Miss Vanuatu with a young patient at Vila Central Hospital*

As Miss Vanuatu, Valerie has already undertaken several projects, including assisting in fund-raising at the Red Cross Ball, helping a local girl write an essay on her community activities, and tutoring children. She served as a judge for the Miss Malapoa contest, and coached the contestants on how to stride confidently

down the runway. She just returned from the international fair at Bourail, New Caledonia, where she promoted tourism in Vanuatu, in cooperation with the Vanuatu Tourism Office (VTO).

I learned that Valerie has been told that she will be Miss Vanuatu for another year, through the middle of 2015, since the VTO cannot afford to hold a contest in 2014. Because of a lack of funds, the last Miss Vanuatu reigned for eight years!

Valerie was originally told that she would be competing in the 2013 Miss Asia Pacific World contest in South Korea. Then the contest had problems, was postponed, and the VTO apparently decided that it couldn't afford the air ticket to send Valerie to Korea. At the last minute, the contest seems to be going ahead, and Valerie was given a ticket and 24 hours' notice to get on the plane!

Back at the hospital, Miss Vanuatu spent time helping a shy girl named Dorothy from Pentecost island who had fallen from a tree and broken her leg, which was placed in an immovable, uncomfortable traction device. Together they played with balloons, filled in a coloring book, and assembled a puzzle. Dorothy was quiet and depressed before the arrival of the team of volunteers. After spending time with Miss Vanuatu, she was smiling.



*Dorothy of Pentecost island and Valerie Martinez*

Lew Toulmin is on a work assignment in Vanuatu, located in the southwest Pacific. Normally he lives in Silver Spring.