

Traveler Who Found Other Side of Fiji Creates Foundation to Help Its People

By Catherine Hosman

In January, Allison Batlin and a handful of volunteers of The Loloma Foundation took more than 10,000 pounds of much-needed supplies to the Fiji Islands.

Inside a 20-foot container were donated medical supplies, clothing, bedding, school supplies and wheelchairs to be divided among the main island of Fiji and the outer islands of Koro, Gau and Beqa.

It wasn't Batlin's first trip to Fiji, and it's certainly not her last. Her journeys began in 1997 when she and her husband, Steve, took a dive vacation at the Marlin Bay Resort on the island of Beqa (pronounced ben-ga), an outer island with a population of 1,800. A world away from their comfortable life in Austin, they were awestruck by the island's tranquil beauty — and touched by its poverty.

"There are no stores, no electricity, no cars or roads, only foot paths," says Batlin, a retired Southwest Airlines flight attendant.

Amber sunsets, aqua seas, palm trees swaying in warm tropical breezes and friendly natives accentuated the couple's island vacation. They met Bob and Bryanne Sykes, and together they embarked on a guided walking tour of the island to visit the village hidden deep in the jungle and tour the Rakua Ravi Ravi School.

Because the school is a distance from the village, children travel by foot to live there all week. The school and its buildings were primitive, and the separate boys and girls dormitories were without beds.

"As an afterthought, I threw into

my suitcase some colored pencils, pens and erasers for the school," Batlin says. "The meager gifts we had to offer were accepted as if they were major grants from large corporations."

Batlin says there is a continental divide between the starvation and poverty and "so much happiness and pride. They were rich," she says. "They had plenty to eat. What to us would be stark poverty was to them vast richness. And what little they had, they wanted to share with us."

Batlin had not seen the worst of the situation. While touring the village she met children in various degrees of disease ranging from scabies to cerebral palsy. Many were crippled by meningitis. But it would be a discarded young man with a handicap that tore at their hearts.

"He was 25 at the time and was tied with a rope from his waist to the leg of a cast-iron bed since he was a child," Batlin says. "There was a thin plastic mattress on the bed. That was the extent of his world."

She knew something had to be done. With the help of the Sykes; Jeff Cox, an officer of Southwest Airlines; and Linda Kwasny, former owner of the Lalati Resort on Beqa, the idea for The Loloma Foundation (meaning From the Heart; Web site: www.lolomafoundation.org) was born.

Cox secured free airfreight from Austin to Fiji. Kwasny created a free medical clinic in one of her resort's buildings. Doctors from the Scripps Hospital in San Diego volunteer their time and travel to Beqa for two-week working vacations. Volunteers in Austin gather medical and dental sup-

plies, school supplies, clothing and toys to be shipped to the islands. Volunteers travel with Batlin to see firsthand the joy they bring to Fiji's forgotten people.

Batlin was born in Dallas, one of six sisters. Friendly competition was stiff in her home when the girls battled for attention. It wasn't until college that Batlin began to know herself. On a whim and a friend's encouragement, she applied for a job with Southwest Airlines. She thought she would fly for a couple of years and then settle down to raise a family. Thirteen years into her career she met Steve on a blind date.

"I knew on the second date he was the one," she says. Serving as president of The Loloma Foundation, when she isn't working with Steve at his downtown Dan McKlusky's restaurant or helping her daughter, Crystal, with homework, Batlin is planning another trip to Fiji in July.

Because of The Loloma Foundation and its founders (Batlin, the Sykes, Kwasny, Dr. Lance Hendricks and Barb Sellars), a new girls dorm has been built on Beqa, and a boys dorm is scheduled when money can be raised. The school's kitchen, once a dirt pit covered by an iron grate, is now a full commissary with a dining hall.

Through creative fund-raising (including rummage sales Batlin stages on Beqa to give the islanders a sense of money and contributing), enough has been raised for a commercial stove and a water catchment program that will allow homes in the



village to have fresh running water. Disabled people now have wheelchairs. Suji, the young man tied to a bed, lives at the Samabula Old People's Home and is getting the professional help he needs.

"I never thought it would come this far," Batlin says. "It wasn't in my plan. I just went there for vacation."

After the first trip, she says she just wanted to go back to her normal life but that things kept "falling in her lap and doors began to open."

"This is what I'm supposed to do," she says. "It's the essence of me. I found how I could best be me."★



Top, Loloma Foundation founders Allison Batlin (second from left) and Dr. Lance Hendricks with Fijiian friends; above, Batlin and a wheelchair recipient