

Madagascar

Building the future by Pat O' Brien



Over the past six years I have been a member of a group that has visited Madagascar on the LEPRA Cycle Ride. In the years we have struggled up hills from mission to mission, we have seen some amazing and heart-wrenching sights.

To say that LEPRA's work and that of Raoul Follereau has changed my life is the understatement of the century; I could never have imagined the state of the developing world and in particular the pure abandonment of those with leprosy without seeing it for myself, and never imagined that it would lead us to where we are. We have seen the work of LEPRA at first hand and it is simply imperative for the lives of so many people.

In Vohipeno and Farafangana we have been faced by the ravages of this disease and the stigma attached to it, and on the side of a road some years ago we simply broke down with the helplessness we felt and the pure hopelessness of the people we saw who had literally been thrown away. They lay in rotting grass huts behind a wall topped with glass in inhuman conditions of neglect and abandonment. The houses at Vohipeno were in a similar state with no water or electricity, and where 450 young boys and girls struggled on callipers, crutches and sticks with no hope for the future.

I am a builder by profession and, with a few friends on the trip and with LEPRA's support, we have started a number of building projects. We have been able to rebuild the village at Farafangana and many of the hospital wards in Vohipeno, and all now have water and electricity. The new 80-bed TB clinic, which was finished on St. Patrick's Day, will be run and supported by funds from LEPRA and other charities.

The kids are growing bigger and the helpless mothers with tiny malnourished babies are now in dry beds. The lives of so many abandoned people are changing for the better but the journey has only just begun. We have a long road to travel yet. The work simply has to continue and we have to eradicate this awful curse and bring dignity back to the people of Madagascar. I know if we can give these people their dignity then maybe we will learn to live with dignity in our own lives.



Pat and his brother by one of the new houses

I wake every night and these people never leave me. My kids are tired of hearing about Madagascar and my brother and friends keep telling me to leave it rest, but of course I cannot. I have learnt to pray again and to trust in the goodness of so many people who have helped us with this work. The same people who time and time again support LEPRA and these forgotten people. On your behalf, we will keep going.