

ATTACHMENT 'D'

News Queensland Bundaberg

Hopes for healing with new sister city agreement and 'blackbirding' apology

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Bundaberg

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Jane and Geoffrey Smith with the Bundaberg Regional Council after the motion to establish the sister city was moved.

Bundaberg will enter a historic sister city agreement with Luganville, Vanuatu's second largest city, in a move members of the local South Sea Islander community hope will start a healing process over historic injustices such as 'blackbirding'.

“The agreement will be formally announced on Friday during a Vanuatu Independence Day celebration being held in Buss Park.

Jane and Geoffrey Smith have a deep understanding of local knowledge as part of a grassroots cultural movement they’ve been involved in for many years through Yumi Olgeta Wellness Bundaberg (pastoral care).

They have advocated relentlessly for social justice and human rights for their Australian South Sea Islander, First Nations and Vanuatu seasonal workers across traditional homelands of the Taribelang Bunda, Gurang, Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng peoples.

The region is home to one of the largest communities of Australian South Sea Islanders of which many are able to trace their roots back to the Island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.

Through their lobbying, Jane’s childhood dream of connecting her love for Vanuatu through a Sister City relationship with her hometown of Bundaberg is now set to be realised.



Luganville Mayor Peter Patty and Bundaberg region Mayor Jack Dempsey sign the Sister City agreement via videolink.

The pair witnessed the motion by Bundaberg region Mayor Jack Dempsey at a meeting this week.

“I’m very, very happy, I got quite emotional when I heard the news, I’ve been wanting to do this for a number of years,” she said.

“South Sea Islander people have done a big thing for Bundaberg, years ago in the cane fields and I just wanted some recognition for the ones that have gone before us today.

“I’m only young but I know from my mum, who lived until she was 92, the history of what she taught us.

“We’re the first in Australia that’s going to raise a Vanuatu flag. I spoke to an elder many years ago over lunch who said it would never happen, and I am so proud and happy for what the council has done for us, it’s going to be a very touching day.”

The relationship was developed through the Vanuatu High Commission Canberra, Bundaberg Regional Council, DFAT, and Luganville Santo Municipal Council Vanuatu supported by community organisations Yumi Olgeta Wellness Bundaberg (pastoral care) and Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson) (ASSIPJ).

Luganville will be Bundaberg’s third sister city alongside Nanning in China and Settsu in Japan.

A TIME FOR HEALING

In the mayor’s speech during the Independence Day ceremony, he is expected to offer an apology to the South Sea Islander community over historic blackbirding practices.

It is believed to be one of the first apologies for this from an Australian political leader.

Blackbirding is defined as the historic practice of enslaving (often by force and deception) South Pacific islanders on sugar and cotton plantations of Queensland.

The kidnapped islanders were known collectively as Kanakas.

Evidence of the history of the Kanakas is still visible in many areas around the region and state.

During the 1800s Bundaberg received some of the 62,500 labourers to Queensland from the 80 islands of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands as part of a sugar trade of which today’s descendants are recognised as ‘Australian South Sea Islanders’ under the 1994 Commonwealth as a ‘distinct cultural group’ who value their heritage and islands of origins.



The Islanders built popular swimming spot The Basin at Bargara from volcanic rocks.

Their Bislama language was also created in Bundaberg to be able to communicate between the different island dialects.

“I believe what Friday is about, and I hope it is, is a healing process,” Geoffrey said.

“A healing process that has never, ever happened...we hope this will bring a healing and togetherness of all people.

“Both Islander people, Australian people, Australian South Sea Islander people, I hope and I pray this happens because we’ve got to come together.

“All the hurt won’t go away and it won’t be forgotten, but we can grow on the better all together.

THE PEOPLE

Jane and Geoffrey are both heavily involved in the South Islander community, providing support to seasonal workers and visitors who come to the Bundaberg region.

“We don’t say ‘the Vanuatu workers’ we say ‘our family’, because they are our family,” she said.

“If they financially need help with food, or with anything we help them and we do with their culture as well.

“We don’t charge them anything, we don’t make anything out of this we just do it for our love and our people.

“We might get a phone call at midnight, our job as a whole we’re 24/7 we don’t turn our phones off at night and if any of the girls or the boys need our help we’re there.”





Jane and Geoffrey Smith have been working for many years to get a sister city agreement between Bundaberg and Vanuatu.

“The enormity of the seasonal workers, the amount of funds they put into communities is enormous,” Geoffrey said.

“These guys are tremendous workers, I’ve never seen a workforce go home a night and sit around at night and talk together about what they can do better for the farmer the next day and this is one thing these workers do.”

Jane said a lot of the workers are very spiritual, practising devotion after work.

“When they come to Australia they don’t put their spirituality aside, we used to visit a crew that used to live in Childers that we’d take food to once a week and we’d have devotion with them before going home,” she said.

“They’re very spiritual people and that’s been going for hundreds of years.”

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