Surf's up! Operation Do Something steps up again for Vanuatu communities

Stewart Free, Jirsch Sutherland Partner

As you're reading this, 100 surf boards are winging their way across the Pacific Ocean to children and teens in Vanuatu's remote communities: no easy feat given the COVID-19 travel restrictions.

But anyone who knows Jirsch Sutherland Partner Stewart Free knows a pandemic wouldn't stop him delivering boards and other donations to the island nation for too long.

"It's taken a lot of work but with the help of some mates, my Jirsch Sutherland colleagues and a big social media campaign, over 100 surf boards and gear will be there in time for Christmas, and another 100 delivered early next year," says Free, who established and runs the "Operation Do Something" initiative.

This is the fourteenth year Operation Do Something has been donating new and used surfboards and new surf gear to grommets and budding grommets at the Vanuatu Surfing Association, not to mention funds and much-needed supplies to the communities all over the Vanuatu archipelago. “All the donations have been such a success, because it’s a collaborative effort. We just do it for the sake of doing it – to just Do Something!” Free says.

It’s this passion for supporting some of Vanuatu’s most remote communities that has been the driving force behind Operation Do Something. Since 2007, Free and his family have travelled to Vanuatu to oversee the distribution of Operation Do Something’s donated cash, surfboards, surf and sporting equipment, educational and art supplies, however, COVID-19 meant they have been unable to make the trip since 2019.

“Over the past 18 months, their stock of surfboards has been steadily decreasing due to general wear and tear and the reef breaks, which cause havoc to the boards. I finally got to clear out my shed at home and have arranged for the boards to be sent over,” says Free. “I have also arranged for some local friends to receive and distribute the donated boards.”

Vital support

Free’s desire to help Vanuatu’s remote communities started when his family ventured beyond their resort while on holiday and discovered many of the locals lacked basic educational supplies, surfboards, sporting equipment, building materials and other essentials.

Many of the local children and teens enjoy surfing and with Operation Do Something funds and donated boards and gear, a number have even been able to compete in Schools event run during Surfest, a series of professional surfing contests held each January at Merewether Beach in Newcastle, NSW.

Over the past few years, Operation Do Something has extended its support of Vanuatu communities, from donating surfboards and sporting equipment to funding a variety of youth and community needs and initiatives including:

- funding the Vanuatu Surfing Association, which organises surfing clinics and competitions for the local children and teens and has funded their participation in overseas surfing competitions.
- providing a school and village on remote Futuna Island with fishing supplies, kitchenware,

construction supplies and hardware.

- establishing a Youth Centre in Shark Bay. “The Youth Centre was built out of a 20-foot shipping container and stocked with everything a youth centre needs – craft and educational supplies, board

repair supplies and tools, games and sporting equipment. The Shark Bay village is relatively isolated, with limited schooling options, and the youth centre provides much needed educational and skills training in an informal setting," explains Free.

- providing temporary financial assistance to a 49-member Ambae Island family who had been

evacuated when debris from volcanic eruptions contaminated their drinking water. “The family had

left their island with little else but the clothes on their backs,” says Free. “We bought items they

badly needed, rather than items we thought they needed, which included a children's cot, stroller and highchair, baby clothes, kitchenware, soccer balls, and art supplies and gave them cash for food and other essentials. It was a very humbling experience to be involved with this family, who were

able to return to their island a few months later when the authorities gave the all-clear."

Free adds that all of Operation Do Something's donations have had a real and positive impact on the Vanuatu communities and the kids are so appreciative of the surf and sporting gear. "We couldn't have done this without the generosity of friends, our local communities and Jirsch Sutherland colleagues. The ability to meet – and exceed – the needs of these remote communities is something you should all be very proud of," he says.

If you would like to donate money to Operation Do Something, the bank details are below, and if you would like to donate used or new surfboards, new surf gear, educational supplies or any other items, please contact Stewart Free on stewartf@jirschsutherland.com.au

Commonwealth Bank
Account Name: Jirsch Sutherland & Co Vanuatu Account
BSB: 062 111
Account number: 1093 3397