

Topu Honis East Timor



Fundraising Dossier

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The Topu Honis Story

Topu Honis is a privately funded NGO founded in 1993 by Father Richard Daschbach, a 72-year-old US priest with dual Indonesian citizenship who has lived and worked with the people of East Timor for 42 years.



Topu Honis is based in Oecussi, a small coastal enclave of East Timor located 200km west of Dili, walled in by Indonesian-controlled West Timor. Oecussi was the site of the first Portuguese landing and colony in Timor. The people of Oecussi are

devoted Catholics, though they blend ancient animist traditions that predate the arrival of the Portuguese with their religious services.

In Meto, Oecussi's little-known tongue, *Topu* means 'to lead by the hand' and *Honis* means 'life'. Topu Honis funds and manages two institutions that cater to children of different ages. The first is a safe house and women's shelter located in Kutet, a small village inhabited by Dawan hill tribe people, located high in a valley hidden from the coast. The people of Oecussi pride themselves on hospitality and kindness to strangers, and love receiving visitors from the West.

"They are very honest, open and responsive to strangers. You just know they are good decent people," says Janet Mitchell, an Australian policewoman stationed with the international peace-keeping force in Dili, who adopted a two-year-old girl from Kutet. "It makes you see that people are decent and there's a lot of good in the world."





There's a small, unsealed road linking Kutet to the port town of Mahata, but most people get there by walking four hours up a steep but breathtakingly beautiful path cut through the jungle. It crosses riverbeds, waterfalls and a 700-metre-high summit, before descending into a valley shadowed by mountaintops.

There are currently 93 children living at Topu Honis Kutet. They are not necessarily orphans in the traditional sense, as Father Richard explains. "It's not really an orphanage – it's safe house," he says. "In an orphanage, the children's parents are completely out of the picture. With some of the kids here, their parents have died. But in most cases, their mothers were widowed and remarried, and they couldn't take the kids because the new husband considers them a burden. In these situations, the children are passed on to extended family, though not as equals. They get treated like workhorses, like second-class citizens. They won't starve but have very limited opportunities in life.

"So we accommodate them... provide them with food, shelter, education and medical care," he said. (Father Richard also acts as Kutet's doctor, referring to medical books and dispensing medicines for free). "Often they'll go visit their mothers. They can leave any time they want and they can come back anytime. But the decision must be theirs; they must want to stay.



"It's the same with our staff," he continued. "We have 14 women working here. Some are widows who don't have a place to go, can't get remarried, or are deaf or have learning disabilities. Some even stay here with their kids. We can't afford to pay them, but they receive free board and a stipend of \$25 per month."

Topu Honis' second institution is a boarding house based in Oecussi's port town of Mahata. It provides board and accommodation for children of high school age, with the express purpose of allowing them to complete their secondary education.

Who is Father Richard?



The son of Pennsylvanian steelworker, Father Richard Daschbach grew up in a religious but progressive household. After high school he studied philosophy and theology, and was ordained as a priest in 1965. Two years later he shipped off to West Timor as a missionary with the Catholic Church.

“At the time, it was the other side of the moon,” he says. “Indonesia was just getting to its feet after the Dutch departed. The people were very poor and there was no development at all. No electricity, no telephones, nothing – just one dirt road crossing the island.”

The Father had to wait six weeks in the capital Kupang until he was able to arrange transport to Oecussi, which was in Portuguese hands at the time. He worked exclusively as a priest for the next 17 years, and remained on good terms with the Indonesians when they annexed Oecussi and East Timor in 1975.

But all that was to change the day a letter with a wax seal arrived from Rome. “In the early eighties, the church decided it would remove foreign priests from parish work and hand over the responsibility to indigenous ministers. But they wanted us to remain and get into other lines of work to keep the name of the church alive. So I asked to come to the village of Kutet,” he says. “For years I’d been using it as a retreat and had many friends there. Kutet is a unique place and I fell in love with it.”

Father Richard speaks fluent Meto and conducts all his classes in the language. Likewise, he incorporates animist practices that are part and parcel of the Metonese culture in his teachings and spiritual guidance.



Just being around Father Richard is an enlightening experience. Everywhere he goes, he is flocked by people – disciples, officials, former orphans who have grown up and now have children of their own – all of whom have deep respect and love for this gentle but hardy man.

“In East Timor, he is revered,” says Janet Mitchell, who got to know the Father intimately while undergoing the adoption process. “The people regard him as a religious person, but also someone with the status of the President as they know of his commitment to them



and the good he does. You can see it in the way they greet him and the way they smile when he gives them his hand.”

The Topu Honis Tertiary Education Fund

On completing primary school, Father Richard's children move to the Topu Honis boarding house in the port town of Mahata, where they can attend high school. On graduation, the most promising are offered the chance to continue their studies by means of Topu Honis' tertiary education fund, which seeks parties from the West to fund individual students.

Among their star alumni is 27-year-old Benny Bana, who was taken under the Father's wing at the age of five. In 2003, visiting Australian journalist Olivia Rosset decided to put Bana through a Bachelor of Law at East Timor's Peace University. He now works for USAID in Dili.

"I like my work because the East Timorese people are very poor and cannot access the legal system," Bana says. "Now I can help them."



Another star graduate is 27-year-old Domingos Oki, the first East Timorese to graduate from Australia's prestigious Duntroon Military Academy. "The course was very competitive," Oki said. "We started off with 128 people but only 78 graduated. Somehow I pushed myself and focused hard on my studies and got on top of it. There were two other Timorese with me but they didn't get through in the end."

Oki is now a lieutenant in the East Timor Army and works with the nation's Secretary of State Defence, focusing on international relations, bilateral agreements, policy formulation and analysis. He is also studying for a Bachelor of Professional Studies with the University of New England's long-distance education program.

Oki is an exceptionally intelligent and astute young man, with an amazing ability to recall dates, events and marks he received in his schooling. But he hasn't forgotten his roots, or the man that made it happen.

"My parents were very poor and could not afford to send me to school. But Padre Ricardo took care of me and taught me English," he says. "He has had a very deep impact on my life. I can't imagine where I would be now without his support."

Father Richard's role in East Timor's Struggle for Independence

After the East Timorese overwhelmingly voted to break away from Indonesia in 1999, the Indonesian Army became enraged. Scores of its soldiers had died at the hands of East Timorese independence fighters during its brutal 24-year-year occupation and, on realising all its efforts had come to nought, implement-ed a “scorched earth” policy.



Eighty per cent of the East Timor's infrastructure was destroyed and hundreds were slaughtered. However, the army did not do the “dirty work” itself. Wary of international attention, it armed and paid pro-integration militia to rape, pillage and plunder on its behalf.

Little Oecussi suffered the brunt of it, as told by Father Richard in this abridged excerpt from his dairy.

“It was late August, 1999. One night, two people from the lowlands came up to Kutet. At first I thought they needed medicine, but after looking at the worried look on their faces, I knew it was something else. They spoke of lootings, burnings and shootings... so of course I let them stay. The next day, 30 more people turned up with similar stories.

“Then and there we decided we were going to have to get organised and defend ourselves. We used old building materials to make spears and bows and arrows. We formed companies, had roll calls and posted sentries throughout the valley.

“The next day we got word that a group of militia were coming up to attack us. So one of my staff members and myself went down and stood in the path with kitchen knives. We made a pact they would only get past over our dead bodies, because we had children to defend. (I retrospect, I know this sound insane. But when you're in the heat of battle there is almost no fear, just pure determination.) Then we saw them coming, but to our relief it was more of our people, more refugees. It was a false alarm but very good practice.

“Over the next few days, we got even more organised. We established evacuation routes, set up a field hospital and stationed men with rocks and spears in strategic locations. We also sent a runner to Dili with a cry for help scribbled on a piece of paper hidden in his shoe to alert foreign troops about what was happening in Oecussi.

“We also scattered hundreds of flyers in the area saying we had received a gun drop from a UN helicopter and were looking for large-calibre bullets to bolster our supplies. It was not true of course, we had no guns. It was psychological warfare and it worked... kept the militias at bay for weeks.

“But on September 22, they came for us. As we waited, I could feel the intensity and solidarity among us. Men had lost their wives and children and none of us know if we would live or die. Everything was deadly quiet. Then mortar bombs started exploding around us and 30 or 40 militia came up the path, shooting in our direction. I wanted to go and negotiate with them but one of my men pulled me down; I could feel the whizzing noise of bullets passing overhead. Then some of our men got scared. We had no choice to evacuate.

“We spent the next few days playing cat and mouse. I had 121 kids with me at the time and about 400 or 500 refugees. We hid rice in caves and underground, and got ready for a long siege in the mountains. But shortly after soldiers from Brunei arrived. The militias disbanded and we were able to return home. But they had



burned and destroyed everything – all our photos, books and tapes of the old people talking about the culture. There was nothing left.”

When the smoke cleared and roll was called, Father Richard’s was only two men down. But those who remained in the lowlands fared worse. Sixty-five bodies were found in a mass grave, with dozens more missing and countless women violated. More than 15,000 people – nearly a third of the population – had been displaced. It would take years and more than a billion dollars in foreign aid for life to return to normal in this otherwise simple and tranquil part of the world.

The Topu Honis Financial Crisis

When East Timor seceded from Indonesia and the authorities yanked Topu Honis' meagre budget, Father Richard turned to his brother Edwin, a pastor in Pennsylvania.



For the last ten years, Father Edwin and his flock have provided 80 per cent of Topu Honis' budget, with the rest kicked in by smaller donors, including the Cameron Family of NSW, who collect donations through their Mount Victoria bookstore, BlackHeath Books.

But a few months ago, Father Edwin passed away. Coupled with the impact of the world financial crisis, donations from the US ground to a halt.

As it stands, Topu Honis has enough money to keep going till March 2010 – albeit at a barebone level. Stipends for staff are months in arrears. Meat has all but disappeared from the menu. The medicine cabinet is bare and urgently needed repairs to the property remain undone.

“For the first time since we opened, we are turning away new children,” Father Richard says. “Thirty-two have already left. They were not sent home; they just left by themselves as they knew our situation was not so good.” From a capacity of 130 people, Topu Honis is now only able to accommodate less than 100.



Nevertheless, the Father remains blindly optimistic that Topu Honis will survive.

“My brother's friends in the US will try to send us some money soon. I don't know how much, but we will be getting something,” he says, his smile never wavering. “One way or another, we will carry on.”

How You Can Help?

So why should you contribute your hard-earned money to Topu Honis, when there are so many other needy charities, organisations and individuals out there? In Father Richard's words:

“No special reason, it is just one of many good causes... because the kids need it. That's all.”

Topu Honis requires US\$2 per day to properly feed, clothe, educated and house one child. Any donation, big or small, will make a real difference.



To make a donation, contact **ANZ Bank**:

Account name: Topu Honis (Richard Daschbach)

BSB: 018-950

Swift Number: ANZBTLDI

Account number: 1011-0450-08030

For a tax-deductible receipt, email Father Richard at enclave.kutet@yahoo.com. The Father only checks his email account intermittently, as there is no electricity, let alone Internet in Kutet. But rest assured, he will reply.

Or perhaps you or your organisation are interesting in sponsoring a young adult's tertiary education and giving him or her a chance to make a positive and lasting contribution to East Timor's development.

It costs US\$3000 to put a Topu Honis graduate through a three-year tertiary degree in East Timor or Indonesia. The amount covers tuition, learning materials and board. For more information, contact Father Richard by email.

Visitors are also welcome at the safe house in Kutet. Board and accommodation are free but donations are graciously accepted. For information on how to get there, contact Mark Heywood in Oecussi on +670 732 2088.