



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NOTRE DAME**  
A U S T R A L I A

# Media Release

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## From Facebook Marketplace to a royal meeting

A Notre Dame staff member's giving nature and the reach of social media have combined to create a rich and rewarding connection between Notre Dame, a Tongan school and Tongan royalty.

Notre Dame's Director of Facilities and Asset Management, Cheryl Swales, was running short of options as she tried to repurpose 1000 student chairs the University had replaced in Sydney about 12 months ago.

With a background in sustainability, Ms Swales was intent on not letting the chairs go to landfill, so she turned to Facebook's Marketplace as a last resort.

Within an hour, an Australian member of the Board of Trustees with the Church of Tonga made contact to say he would happily take the chairs for a new high school under construction in the Polynesian county.

"That was just music to my ears," Ms Swales said. "I thought this is perfect, this is exactly where we would like to see the chairs go."

In the months that followed, Ms Swales arranged for the donation of more unneeded furniture and books, which was sent to Tonga in shipping containers organised by the Church.

So grateful was the Church that it sent her an invitation to the opening ceremony of the Siasi 'o Tonga High School in Matatoa, Tongatapu in May.

Ms Swales travelled to Tonga with Notre Dame's Chancellor Chris Ellison and Board Member Hilary Johnston-Croke to attend the opening ceremony and discuss partnership opportunities with several schools.

The trio were honoured to be invited to a private meeting with the King of Tonga, His majesty Tupou VI, and the Queen Her Majesty Nanasipau'u after the ceremony.

They also met with Australian High Commissioner to the Kingdom of Tonga HE Brek Batley and Cardinal Soane Patita Paini Mafi, Bishop of Tonga.

"It was an honour to meet with the King and Queen of Tonga, as well as Cardinal Mafi and the High Commissioner Mr Batley," said Mr Ellison.

“This was a great opportunity to strengthen the relationship with our South Pacific neighbours and open up opportunities for Tongan students to travel to Australia to study. I am grateful for the assistance of the High Commissioner and look forward to continuing to work together in the future.”

Mr Ellison, Ms Johnston-Croke and Ms Swales were introduced to the Vice Chancellor and Senior Staff of Christ’s University of the Pacific and members of the Church of Tonga. They made important connections with the Director of Catholic Education for the Diocese of Tonga, Soane Vahe, and three Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools.

“It was a great opportunity to discuss Catholic education in Tonga and their needs,” Ms Johnston-Croke said. “We had a beautiful Tongan lunch served by their senior hospitality students.

“We then had a follow up meeting with Director Vahe on the Broadway Campus on May 24 to discuss how Notre Dame could support Catholic education in Tonga in the future.”

The Siasi ‘o Tonga High School currently has 107 Year 9 students and will add another year level each year, as well as offering vocational pathways.

Ms Swales said the trip to Tonga and the experience of attending the opening ceremony of the school had left an indelible mark on her.

“It was kind of surreal because all of this started out with donating furniture for the opening of a new school, but I didn’t realise how significant it was until January this year,” she said.

“I didn’t expect to end up meeting royalty over furniture, not in your wildest dreams would you expect that.”

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