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The teachers who uncovered alleged sexual abuse in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s

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John and Elisa Mendzela detail their experience teaching in Papua New Guinea in their new memoir, *In the Best Interests* (Monique Ford/The Post)

When John and Elisa Mendzela watched their college inspector hold the hand of a young Papua New Guinean student, they were reassured it was simply the culture there.

Despite the young boy's obvious discomfort, the couple recalled Martin Simpson (not his real name) explaining that "boys and men often held hands, just as friendly behaviour".

Simpson was "handsome ... lean, with blond hair, fair skin and penetrating eyes" and "more like a knowledgeable tour guide than a senior official", the couple wrote in their memoir, *In the Best Interests*, self-published in September, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) independence on September 16.

At the time, the pair had just arrived in PNG to start a three-year contract, teaching at one of the four English-speaking colleges – teaching top students seen as the future of newly independent PNG.

Simpson was an inspector from the Education Department, responsible for professional standards at all four colleges.

Finding out he was also gay and as liberal people, the pair put aside what they saw.

But when evidence of alleged sexual relationships between male staff and students sexual abuse at their school, Keravat College, came to light, they decided to investigate further and take action.

What they didn't know was that it would be the start of a fight for justice that would last the entirety of their contract, eventually ending with an investigation by the Ombudsman Commission in 1981–

not only of events at their school but more widely into the Education Department administration. The case was named The Keravat Affair.

“We did what we set out to do,” John says, “although not perhaps exactly what we thought we'd do”.

Sat in their cream leather sofa in a multi-storey home in Eastbourne, Wellington, John and Elisa recount the grief, joy, laughter, sadness, adventure and trauma of their three years spent in PNG almost 50 years ago.

Dotted around their home are carvings and artworks from the small country in the southwestern Pacific, a reminder of their time there.



John on a cave expedition while teaching in Papua New Guinea, enjoying the adventure of a new country and diverse biodiversity and culture. (Supplied/John and Elisa Mendzela)

All the documents they had gathered during their investigations were ordered in chronological order and put away in a drawer until about 10 years ago, when they finally decided to create an official record of their experiences by writing a memoir, revisiting the documents.

In their late 20s, the couple had set off to PNG after living in the depths of New Zealand's South Island for two years.

Elisa, originally from the United Kingdom, and John from the United States met at Leeds University in the UK as leaders of ecological groups, trying to reclaim and regenerate waste ground from mining. They soon married and started working in education.

“We've always been a bit serious,” Elisa says. “I suppose we're a bit too serious maybe, but we're keen on making a difference and that's been our whole life ... we never met at a disco, we met on a slag heap.”

An advertisement from the New Zealand High Commission brought them to the South Island, wanting to leave Britain in the 1970s, battling economic turmoil, widespread strikes and social upheaval.

But finding it not too dissimilar, the pair set off to PNG through a recommendation of a teacher colleague who had also secured a job there.

To the pair, who were “young, well-qualified and adventurous”, Invercargill had not quite quenched their thirst for adventure and arriving in PNG was like nowhere they had lived before.

The “sumptuous mass of jungle” and birds with diverse, enthusiastic students was a “truly beautiful environment” to be teaching in, Elisa says.



Mount Hagen singing (Supplied/John and Elisa Mendzela)

Eight hundred secondary school graduates, 16 or older, were chosen through competitive exams to attend the four colleges.

“They knew they had an opportunity to make a difference in the world, and they wanted to grab it and make the best of it and so they studied hard, they worked hard and they played hard. They were just wonderful.

“They suffered so much in the end and with all the things that happened to them and yet at all times they showed grace under pressure.”

When allegations came to them that students were being sexually abused, the pair did what they considered their professional duty and went through “proper channels” to address it.

They had first heard from colleagues that Simpson was chatting with individual students after lights out, which was normally strictly enforced. An arts teacher was also rumoured to be personally involving himself with a male student - later confirmed by the student in the Ombudsman report.

Not long after, they were handed photocopies of handwritten letters to someone working at Keravat, written by various friends in PNG and Australia.

“They described in colourful language — and disturbing detail — homosexual relationships and abusive activities. Occasional parties where young men new to the group were given drink and drugs and ‘initiated’ seemed to be a highlight for the expatriate organisers and participants,” the memoir read.

Although it used nicknames, some identities were obvious and Simpson was prominently referred to.

“Other participants apparently worked in the PNG education system too. And at least some of the young men being ‘initiated’ were clearly current or former college students.”

It was important not to make any action they took public for the students – particularly in a country where, to this day, male same-sex sexual activity is illegal.

But when their avenues were blocked, they were confronted with the extent of the efforts by the administration to keep the alleged abuse hidden.

Years later, one of the superintendents who was “got rid of” was seen driving a taxi in Brisbane.

“Perhaps we didn’t understand that fully at the time”, John says, that for some expatriates who were considered important figures in PNG but in reality did not have any professional skills, “they had a lot to fight, to hold onto” in post colonial PNG.



Police surround students after invading the campus (Supplied/John and Elisa Mendzela)

The couple went through multiple inquiries, confronted with power imbalances in a post-colonial era and even sent on a “punishment posting” for whistle-blowing into the thick jungle where a gravel airstrip was the only way in and out for their last year in PNG, they claim.

The eventual involvement of local media was instrumental to taking their case further, initiated through a chance encounter with the chairman of the National Broadcasting Corporation in a restaurant urinal.

“A lot of people knew stuff was going on,” John says. “Essentially it was a widely known secret that was not being proclaimed or in the public eye.”

The substantive amount of documentation and evidence they had was also compelling.

Eventually, students demanded answers after the pair were sacked with no explanation, other than it was “in the best interests of PNG”. Riot police, armed with shotguns, tear gas and semi-automatic rifles descended onto the school campus following riots.

Hundreds of students were arrested and an eviction notice delivered to John and Elisa as well as a deportation order from the Foreign Ministry on their wedding anniversary.

But soon after, the Chief Ombudsman's Commission launched its own investigation.

The final report tabled in Parliament in 1981 recommended John and Elisa get new contracts to finish their three-year appointment and attacked the Education Department's "heavy-handed administrative control, which was arbitrary, abusive and unfair; which protected incompetence in those loyal to it; and which covered up immoral practices". It also castigated the Education Department's Committee of Inquiry for failing to investigate allegations of improper sexual activities as its terms of reference required.

Best of all, Simpson had resigned and left PNG.

The Ministry of Education in Papua New Guinea has been contacted for comment.

The couple never knew which students had suffered abuse but recalled one student, keen on expressive arts and who had spent some of his free time helping the head of department in the gallery, who "went insane", saying he hated girls. He was arrested, taken away in a wagon "like a cage".

"It was truly tragic, and more tragic that a number of people who had the opportunity didn't do anything for several years ... we came along and just stumbled into things," Elisa says.



A newspaper clipping from local media, after the arrests. (Supplied/John and Elisa Mendzela)

By the end of the three years, the pair were "completely burnt out". Their good friend who had encouraged them to go to PNG and whom was instrumental to the investigations had also died during their time there.

Had she been fighting on her own, Elisa doesn't think she would have got nearly as far.

"But at the end of the day, we were a team of two in the world and you just try and do your bit to make the world a little bit bloody better."

They had kept in touch with a number of students since leaving Keravat but most communication had fizzled out over the years.

“You also get an interesting phenomenon that people don't always want to remember times when they were under a lot of stress, even if they're quite pleased and proud of what they've done,” John says.

After putting their time in PNG behind them, the couple became business partners, working as independent governance and management consultants, challenging institutional change projects across more than 30 countries.

But a phone call from out of the blue came about 10 years ago from two of their former students with the news they had got married. The husband had a high up position in the police and his wife worked in the public sector.

“They were so positive about what had happened, despite probably not ever achieving as much as they might have done because they missed a lot of schooling, and yet they were so grateful to us,” Elisa says.

Knowing Simpson resigned and the ultimate findings of the Ombudsman Commission report being made public, gave them some solace.

“In a country like PNG, opportunities are scarce and you don't get a second chance so they were very principled in standing up for what they felt was right, regardless of the personal cost,” John says.

“In terms of closure, we know it had some impact, but we won't know exactly what, and the world moves on. So it's more about fulfilment, getting that story out there.”



John and Elisa pictured in the 1980s in the PNG Post-Courier. (Supplied/John and Elisa Mendzela)