Long Time Santo resident is included in 2014 Queen’s Birthday Honours List.

Tony Whitley, a resident of Santo for the last 20 years, has been honoured this year with a BEM, a British Empire Medal, for his work as co-founder of Rowhani Baha’i School, for his service to education and service to the community.

Mr Whitley, who came to Santo in 1994 with his wife and four children, from New **Z**ealand, initially settled in Matantas, Big Bay, Santo where he and his wife ran a small Baha’i School for three years. After this period, they relocated to the town area with their growing family (now five children), becoming caretakers of the Baha’i Centre for a further three year period. It was during this time that he and his wife, Sue, established the now thriving Rowhani Baha’i School, in 1999. Initially it was started in a small room on the main road, above Luganville Stationery with an enrolment of 7 students, but within a year was relocated across the road, in an old colonial building next to the Unity Shell service station, as well as renting rooms above the Unity Shell store, with an enrolment of almost 90 students. The school continued to grow and flourish with increasing numbers of students but the lack of proper outdoor facilities led to an offer from a Pacific based Educational Foundation for funding to purchase land and build buildings. It was at this stage that the school was offered to and accepted by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Vanuatu, so that it could become a community school rather than a private business. The new school was built on the edge of town, in Chapuis, Luganville, during 2002 and classes commenced there in 2003.

Last year the school, now with classes from kindergarten to year 10 had a role of 253 students and a teaching staff of 14, with ancillary staff and volunteers, a total of around 20. Tony is now the school counsellor and his wife, Sue, the Principal.

Apart from building and helping with the running of the school, Mr Whitley has also been a key figure in the care of leprosy patients all over Vanuatu, working for more than 10 years as country co-ordinator for the Pacific Leprosy Foundation, which is a foundation based in New **Z**ealand. His work, which up until recently was entirely voluntary, includes organising the delivery of food to the patients all over Vanuatu, as well as ensuring that their children’s school fees are paid each term. He arranges for homes to be built where necessary.. He arranges medical visits to hospitals for the patients when needed and is always alert to any new cases of leprosy which may arise. Although not a trained doctor by any means, his work over the years with the Foundation has meant that he is familiar with the symptoms of leprosy and is able to recommend those with early signs for treatment, thus avoiding the damaging and disfiguring effects of the disease.

Over the years he has facilitated and negotiated the funding of many small businesses –from small stores, to bullock farming and jewellery carving, so that patients may become financially independent and lead more fulfilling lives, knowing that they are able to contribute to their communities and families. He has been able to work with many volunteers throughout the country, ensuring that they regularly visit the patients on behalf of the Foundation, checking on their health and finding out if they have any needs or difficulties. From time to time donors from New **Z**ealand have sent second hand clothes, bedding, books and toys for the patients and their families and these have been distributed by Mr. Whitley, on the donors’ behalf. Although there are challenges in this kind of work, Mr Whitley’s perseverance and integrity have meant that all aid sent to Vanuatu for the benefit of the patients and their families, has reached them and helped them in their lives.

Mr Whitley, this year, celebrated his 75th birthday, although you would not know this to look at him – he is as active and healthy as one 20 years his junior! He has committed his life to the service to those around him and we are delighted that he has been honoured in this way. We send our congratulations to him and his wife and family and know that although originally from England, his heart is in Vanuatu and he is a wonderful ambassador for this nation. When he meets the Queen at the Buckingham Palace garden party next June, to which he and his wife will be invited, he is sure to sing praises of Vanuatu, and her wonderful people, who he loves dearly and who he is sure to serve until the end of his days.