

Children's fighter from war zone



Irene Gleeson with some of her 5000 students in Uganda.

Ellie Harvey
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IRENE Gleeson was standing among thousands of her African students in northern Uganda when she was told she would be made an Officer of the Order of Australia.

Ms Gleeson, 64, has hardly been able to contain herself since, telling all her friends of the honour.

"It's equal to a military honour," she says, beaming. "I feel like I've been a general in the war zone of north Uganda for 20 years, so I'm very proud."

Ms Gleeson is recognised for "service to international relations, particularly through sustained aid for children affected by war and HIV/AIDS in northern Uganda".

She has worked there since 1991 and has established four medical clinics, an AIDS hospice and adjoining infant orphanage, community churches, water wells and an FM radio station.

But perhaps the biggest of her achievements have been schools that cater for 3500 primary students and 1500 youths doing vocational training.

The schools also provide full day care, medical services and meals free to war-affected children. The students are mainly child soldiers or abductees greatly traumatised by war.

Ms Gleeson oversees a staff of 400 Ugandan teachers, nurses, builders, counsellors, cooks, drivers and volunteers.

Almost 20 years ago she sold her home at Narrabeen on Sydney's northern beaches to finance the project.

Now, whenever she is in Australia, she lives in her daughter's garage, but is adamant: "It was worth it."

"I do it because I hate inequality," she says. "I was able to raise my four children and 15 grandchildren here very happy and strong, and I just can't ignore the fact that children are hungry and cold and lonely.

"So that's why I decided to go to a place where no one else goes, right into the war zone."

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