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Tsunami relief work in Sri Lanka

A volunteer project in Matara, Sri Lanka in July 2006 offered Jenny and 11 other girls a chance to make a difference for tsunami victims with their time and effort.

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A Thoughtful Initiative

To “take a stab at making a difference” was what moved Jenny, one of a group of 12 girls from Singapore and Hong Kong, to venture

out on a service project to the tsunami-hit town of Matara, Sri Lanka, in July 2006, in spite of the mounting civil tension in the country then.

The project was initiated by *Promoción del Desarrollo Cultural y Social de Andalucía* (PRODEAN), an NGO in Spain, and jointly organized by Family Enrichment Society, Singapore (FES) and East Asian Educational Association, Hong Kong (EAEA). A tsunami relief grant of 5,200 euros was available to sponsor the volunteers who would work on location and supervise the use of the grant to its completion. It brought together these 12 volunteers for an extremely fruitful experience.

The Preparation

We were a group of nine girls from Singapore and three from Hong Kong, and we began preparing ourselves several months prior to the

trip in our respective cities.

Ranmalie, a Sri Lankan friend in Singapore, gave basic language lessons and explained Sri Lankan culture. We had other talks to help build team spirit and also a seminar on Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church. Both groups prepared several activities and games for the children in Sri Lanka such as balloon-twisting, origami and sing-along sessions.

To give a chance to other girls who couldn't go but were interested to help, we raised more funds selling home-made cookies and T-shirts designed by Joanna, an Architecture student. Some friends and colleagues freely offered generous donations.

Through these months, we got to know one another better. Coming from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, some of us are young professionals while others are still at

university. The common purpose of service to the tsunami victims was what united us, and this was to be the beginning of many new friendships among us.

Ten Unforgettable Days in Matara

The tsunami occurred almost two years ago in Dec 2004, but it was evident upon our arrival in Matara that there was still much to be done. Father Charles Hewawasam is the local coordinator for tsunami relief work: re-housing projects, livelihood projects to equip victims with new work skills and a scholarship fund for tsunami-affected children. He was also our coordinator.

We began by visiting some families with him. Most of them live presently in new houses, often unfinished, and many had hardly any furniture. Someone noted, “What impressed me was their generosity. Despite their situation, many still offered us

refreshments during the visit, and those who could not felt sorry for not being able to do so! This definitely made an impact on me.”

The real work started when we collaborated with some young people from the local parish to finish Mr. Kumar’s house. Together, we painted walls, sandpapered doors and window frames, shoveled and wheelbarrowed soil to make a garden, and finally even planted some seedlings. Many among us have never done such work, but the physical demand was all forgotten with the sense of fulfillment at the end of the day. We had contributed in some small way to encourage Mr. Kumar, 30, to get back on his feet after losing his wife and three children to the tsunami.

Another construction project was building a kitchen for Mdm. Muriel, who was sickly and lived with her 90-year-old mother. We manually

laid the building foundations with large rocks and stones broken to fit one another, while some men did the final masonry. Dorothy and another girl bathed Muriel's mother and offered her a manicure, much to the old lady's delight.

In nearby Welligama, another tsunami affected area, we had activities for some student boarders and children of an orphanage. We were able to present each child with a "goodies bag" with things they had not enjoyed for a while. Joanna's balloon twisting skill thrilled the children who all wanted to have photos taken with their balloon figures. After Judy had worked with the children at cookie-decoration, the usual tea-time cookies had become a special treat for them.

The donations not only purchased a netball kit for the girls of a school netball team, it also led to a friendly

match between us and the girls. The young school girls were good players! It was great fun, but what gave us most joy was to see the children so happy. Alice, Jenny and Katherine even had energy for a second game with them! **An Impact that Would Last a Lifetime**

The work and living conditions we faced in Matara were expectedly minimal. More than one found herself turning to daily prayer and Holy Mass for strength and support. Seeing the joy of the Sri Lankans amidst such poverty certainly moved us all to a greater appreciation of the things so often taken for granted.

The grant from PRODEAN managed to help three schools rebuild their libraries and stock up new books, the parish church in Welligama had its grotto repaired, and we were able to provide some basic furniture and kitchenware for five families who

had lost their homes to the waves. The Sri Lankans were all expressive of their gratitude and some in most unexpected ways: one lady's present was simply a papaya picked right from her own garden!

Amidst the many gestures of gratitude, we were moved by the profusion of their appreciation. We certainly did not deserve so much attention. After all, as Jenny had said, we merely wanted to “take a stab at making a difference”.

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