

Armstrong Newsletter • A Ministry of Cole Community Church

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Ironically, news media, an unfailing window to human suffering, serves to desensitize. I have watched and read hundreds of stories about suffering without losing a night's sleep. But after seeing the footage of the tsunami that hit North Sumatera, I somehow internalized the immensity of suffering in a way I had never experienced before. I had a hard time sleeping during those first weeks after the event and my heart was breaking for people who lived far 1500 miles from our home in Central Java.

When I first touched down two weeks after the tsunami in Aceh, the immensity of what had happened was too much to get my mind around. Collin Powell, the US Secretary of State at the time, said that of all the devastation he had seen of wars and disasters, he had never seen anything like this! Three consecutive waves had leveled houses, buildings and bridges for up to three and half kilometers inland leaving 170,000 people dead and over half a million people without homes. Still after more than two weeks after the tsunami, there were still bodies which had not yet been buried.

On the remnants of a road in the village of Teugoh Blangmee I met two young men staring listlessly at the ocean. One of the young men, Jeulfica, had lost his parents, his two younger sisters and a brother. He had survived because he was in the capital city of Banda Aceh attending university and lived in a place four kilometers from the beach. His rented room had filled with flood water but he remained safe and decided to take a boat to Blangmee to see what had happened to his family. His friend, Wan, was in his house in Blangmee when the tsunami hit and miraculously was able to grasp onto a wardrobe closet and rode the tsunami for two kilometers after which it slammed him into a mountain. He lost his entire family, seven in all, and received multiple injuries including countless lacerations, a broken arm and ribs. Both stared out at the ocean, which had once been shielded by rows of houses and coconut trees. Now it served as a backdrop as both Jeulfica and Wan spoke in soft tones, each willing to share their stories and tears with me. These stories, and many more like them were the reason I was in Aceh and I did not want them to be obscured by the planning and things to get done.

After the initial weeks of meetings with various international and local NGOs and with the victims of the disaster, a response to this disaster was formulated and although it was clear that a high priority of the tsunami victims was to have homes and restored livelihood, it was clearer still that a Christ like response ran deeper than leaving a legacy of wood, brick and mortar. The people of Aceh had been broken to the core, lost loved ones, livelihood and homes.

A friend and colleague from Canada, who is living in one of the villages where we are reconstructing homes, had an opportunity to take the maiden voyage with a crew of fishermen from a neighboring village who had just completed building and equipping their 60 foot fishing boat, said this, "It was priceless to observe Samaun, the captain. He could not get the smile off his face the whole trip!!!! He lovingly listened to every creak and groan of his new ship. The whole crew, though very reserved, was elated to be underway!! We traveled for 12 hours, no chairs or beds, no amenities but it didn't matter! They now have a means of livelihood and they were proud of the time that they themselves invested in the design and building of this boat!"



Jeulfica and Wan



One of the new boats!

The Year the Tsunami Changed Our Lives

You know there are just some events in life that you will always look back at and realize it was truly a pivotal time that changes you for the rest of your life. December 26, 2004 was one of those days. We were at a Canadian friend's house for a "Boxing Day" celebration. During the party people began talking about a tsunami that had hit the west coast of Aceh and even on up to Thailand. Little did we know the extent of the damage done by the massive wave.

Several people at the party immediately began networking on ways to help the victims. One of our friends who had lived many years in Aceh was one of the first non-Indonesians into the area. The stories that filtered out were mind-boggling and heart wrenching. How could anyone have survived?

On the other side of this letter Nick will share some of the stories of people he has encountered while working in Aceh. The stories of survival are amazing; the amount of loss people experienced is heart-wrenching but God is in the midst of all of this. And He has been in the midst of our family—guiding and directing as well as giving strength and peace through it all.

A Juggling Act - Nick: Almost immediately Nick began working the phones, gathering information, looking for funding and Indonesian organizations that could get into the area quickly. We were scheduled for a family vacation that following weekend and at first we were not going to go. We cut the vacation in half and Nick spent most of his time working as we played at the beach and had fun. He has since been traveling between the two worlds of Aceh, a very strict Muslim area, and Salatiga-very Javanese syncretistic area. He traveled pretty much every other week until the end of 2005. It has been extremely difficult to balance between family, the work in Aceh and the regular CRWRC work he is involved in. It has definitely been a juggling act for Nick trying to keep every ball moving in the right direction and being willing to let some balls drop from time to time. Those of you that know Nick know that he doesn't like to drop things.

Riding the Roller Coaster - Laura: I knew when the tsunami hit that life was destined to change some but had no idea how much it would until we went on vacation and I found the kids and I spending a lot more time together away from Nick. It sure wasn't the family vacation we had planned. Much of this past year was spent being a single mom...going to school programs on my own, parent-teacher conferences on my own (had my first one as a junior high parent and I was kind of scared!), and just keeping the peace between two adolescent children while also working full-time as the elementary principal. I got really tired of being asked if Nick was in or out of town...I wanted to wear a sign that said, "If you don't see him with me, then he most likely is in Aceh." ☺ It was a constant adjustment each week: loving it when Nick was home, but then just making it through the weeks he was gone. I have to admit at the end of 2005 I did hit a wall...I think I just had been holding on so tight, trying to do the right thing, trying to be the wife/mom/dad/principal etc. on my own effort. 2006 has begun differently with the awareness that life is a roller coaster, but even in all the ups and downs, I don't have to hang on so tightly to the bar holding me there. I just need to hang onto God. He will sustain me and I can rest in that.

Like a Yo-Yo - Annaliese: When the tsunami hit Annaliese was half way through her 7th grade year. This first year of Junior High had not started off the greatest because she started school two weeks late and spent most of the first quarter trying to get caught up. By the time the tsunami hit, Annaliese had settled in to life as a junior higher. She played soccer and was still active in co-leading an after school Bible study group for 4th-6th graders. During the spring she took her 2nd trip to the island of Madura (a very strong Islamic area of the northeast corner of Java) and then this past summer she went for a 3rd time. She loved being able to interact with students her age and to getting to know about the Madurese culture. Annaliese's year probably would be a bit like a yo-yo...When she was up, she was really up, when she was down, she was down yet ready to bounce back up! She has struggled with her Dad being gone so much...she is a Daddy's girl but God has worked in her heart as well...giving her peace and the ability to see why this is important.



Wrestling with Life - Luke: As most of you know, Luke broke his leg at the beginning of 5th grade. By the beginning of 2005, he was back to his old active self: playing basketball, soccer and any other sport that he had opportunity to play. He is well into his 6th grade year and we see a great deal of maturing going on. Last Friday at a basketball game, I saw Luke think about his teammates before thinking of himself. He was one of the tallest and strongest players on the floor but he made sure to pass the ball to the other players, girls included. Then today his music teacher told me how he has been really considerate in class, helpful to

her and encouraging to others. Of course we don't always see this behavior at home, but we are thankful for the ways that God is working in his heart. When Nick is gone it means that I get the brunt of his need to wrestle and be physical as all boys do. But, I have also seen him take on an attitude of "being the man of the house" and he is more protective of both Annaliese and me. Luke is definitely at the age of wrestling to try and define who he is and who he will be. He is growing up!!

