

Boxing Day 2004 – a time of great anticipation and excitement for the Cunningham family as we raced back home from Christmas in Kiama to repack our bags for a long-awaited and much-needed holiday in Sri Lanka. Bruce, our daughter Pip and I were travelling ahead of our dear friends Phe and Chandra and their 14 year old son Rory, and Phe's sister Robbie, who were to meet us in Colombo in a few days. Chandra is from Sri Lanka and had organised a complete itinerary for an amazing holiday on the East coast (Beruwela, Galle, etc.) and in the tea country. The trip was also special as we were planning to commemorate our older daughter Christie's death from cancer at 16, two years earlier, in a meaningful way in such a spiritual country.

We counted our blessings getting a seat to Singapore; travelling 'sub-load' as airline staff is always uncertain during holiday times. We felt even more blessed getting the last 3 seats on Emirates to Colombo. As we entered the departure lounge in Singapore we noticed lots of Indonesians clustered around a small television screen – it seemed there had been an earthquake in Sumatra but details were sketchy. Mid flight we saw on the in-flight TV screen a small announcement "Tsunami hits Sri Lanka" ! As no-one on board mentioned anything further and the crew and other passengers seemed to be unperturbed by the news, we rationalised that it must not be particularly newsworthy – little did we know!!



Landing in Colombo, we were still in the dark – customs, immigration, police - all failed to mentioned anything about a tsunami. The first indication we had that things were a bit more serious than we thought was the 3 hour wait for a taxi! A lot of tourist booths too were unmanned and information about travel was impossible to obtain. Browns Beach Hotel at Negombo where we planned to stay for two days did not answer their

phone but we managed to secure a room in a guest house at Negombo (1 hour north of Colombo). Eventually we found a very helpful tour operator who drove us to the guest house in his own car – the first of many kind acts we witnessed from Sri Lankans; we finally fell into bed at 3 a.m.

The morning of the 27th saw us glued to the guest house proprietor's television when the full extent of the devastation in Sri Lanka was to become apparent. We shared the lounge with two German couples who had visited Galle and the East coast 2 days earlier – they were able to provide a description of what the damage meant to the infrastructure. We presumed that if the damage was so widespread on the West coast, the east coast must be even worse.



At Mr Srilal's suggestion we travelled in his van down to Negombo beach to find tourists being evacuated from all beachside hotels, nearly all shops and restaurants closed and the port and fishing village in complete disarray. Large fishing boats were tossed up on the road like matchstick toys, or lying at the bottom of the harbour; there did not appear to be many boats still seaworthy. Extreme shock was evident on the locals' faces and this was an area that was not as badly damaged as other towns. Only two people had died there.

After spending another night here we travelled to Colombo to meet up with our friends who had the unenviable decision to make – whether to still come or stay in the safety of Sydney. I guess they felt a responsibility to us too. Colombo seemed to be operating normally. We discussed leaving Sri Lanka but felt that airline seats belonged to those who were injured or had been underwater and we knew we had western skills that could be very useful. We had also had experience years before of aid work – living in Fiji in the 70's we helped with the clean up after a major cyclone. We decided that our first port of call should be the Red Cross office to volunteer in

whatever way we could. To say chaos reigned there would be an understatement. The head office is in a very small building, on the 4th floor, reached by a narrow set of stairs. There was not enough room inside to fit all the volunteers and the one ceiling fan did nothing to relieve the heat. Everyone was in shock and the enormity and extent of the crisis meant that the employees were completely unable to cope, even with assistance from foreigners and expat Sri Lankans home for the Christmas holidays.



Red Cross Office, Colombo - before we left for Galle (two days after Tsunami) - little did we realise we were the first assessment team for the Red Cross !

As a nurse Phe volunteered, along with Bruce, to join a medical team travelling down the coast. I decided to stay in Colombo with Pip as we felt the conditions were too unknown to expose a 16 year old to danger. We spent the day at Red Cross unpacking and re-packing donated medicines for shipment to various parts of the country. Even in such a crisis everything still had to be inventoried!

The next day saw us (armed with a Red Cross shopping list) at supermarkets, pharmacies and street stalls trying to source more medications and basic supplies (water, food and basic health needs for the medical team). We borrowed a car from Sandy's nephew and filled it to the brim with medicines and goods we thought would be suitable to distribute to those in need.

Our own health was an issue too. It had not been necessary to have any shots in Sydney, but the news was full of dire warnings of the possibility of typhoid and cholera epidemics and an outbreak of malaria. We managed to procure typhoid injections and commenced anti malarial tablets. We agreed that we would not put ourselves in any situation where we could contract cholera.

During the 5 hour wait to procure medical supplies at one pharmacy, Pip started chatting to an Australian lady. Annabelle and her fiance Sandy Gale had narrowly survived the tsunami at Nilaveli, near Trincomalee, and had returned to Colombo to volunteer their services, despite Sandy breaking bones in his foot! As a lawyer and doctor they had great skills to offer. Coincidentally they too had volunteered with Red Cross and had been given Bruce and Phe's names as part of their team.

At the request of Sandy's nephew Phe and I also spent some time at a conference centre in Colombo offering assistance and an 'ear' to the many traumatised tourists who were slowly making their way back to the capital. There were many nationalities under the one roof – at least it was airconditioned and every tourist had a mattress. The tourist board had gone to a lot of trouble to provide hotel quality meals and had quickly installed phones and desks for embassy and airline staff, etc.

The mood was very sombre with many people obviously feeling a mixture of both elation and guilt at having survived; they were still in shock and slowly processing the enormity of their experience. There were many amazing stories of close calls and sad stories of those who had lost a family member or friend. People were obviously anxious to get back home; some governments had mobilised rapidly, others were slower to react. We managed to collect some medicines from tourists who could replace them back home, along with promises of using their experiences to assist with awareness and fund raising back home.

Wednesday the 30th saw us back at Red Cross finalising plans for Bruce, Phe, Sandy and Annabelle to leave Colombo for the south – their destination was uncertain although the Red Cross despatcher promised there would be a place for them to sleep. There was a long delay while a new translator was found – it seems the original volunteer was scared off by our Australian accents!

Finally they were underway and it was with some trepidation that I kissed Bruce goodbye. Our life has had its share of drama and tragedy, including Bruce being in New York on September 11th and Pip in Bali during the bombing! I felt very anxious to be out of phone contact yet again and had an appreciation for family members back home anxiously awaiting news of loved ones.

Pip and I farewelled the 'Aussies' and went shopping! While we were at the Red Cross office we had been approached by a Sri Lankan volunteer to enquire if we could help in a refugee camp north of Colombo where 2,000 people had sought refuge at St Mary's Basilica, Ragama. She gave us a list of essential items that were needed (soap, shampoo, sanitary items, towels, baby formula, baby clothes, cups, plates, etc) that we bought at the only supermarket taking credit cards.

We borrowed another car and set off in the heat next morning with another nephew acting as our translator. After many stops for directions we finally found St Mary's – it was in idyllic surroundings up in the hills but seemed deserted. Finding a priest who appeared to be in charge, we learned that there had been not 2,000 but 10,000 refugees there the previous day. They had been broken up into smaller groups and shipped closer to their villages as the church simply could not feed such large numbers.

We were actually quite relieved as the amount of goods we had would have been completely inadequate for such a large number and distributing these would have created a riot! Fortunately the priest knew where to redirect us – to Negombo! "I know where that is" I said so off we drove. After two more false leads we finally found 1,500 people (mostly women and children) living at Don Bosco Technical Orphanage school on the outskirts of Negombo.



Pippa helping out

The warmth of the welcome we received set the tone for many more visits to refugee camps. We found it extremely gratifying to be able to hand out essential items. We had also bought marshmallows and lollies for the children – a queue formed very quickly with the children behaving impeccably. The bags of marshmallows came with a free comb – a much sought after object by the teenage girls! Our boxes of goods were soon empty and I promised to come back the next day with more supplies. I was struck by the mothers' requests for school books for their children –forward looking so soon after the tsunami.

We visited the Red Cross again the next day as Father Bernard, the priest in charge of the orphanage, was desperate to get hold of some tents. Families were sleeping on the ground on verandahs and inside the church and classrooms and the school was unable to reopen until they could be accommodated elsewhere. Procuring those tents proved to be beyond us. The bureaucracy involved in getting anything meant that we could not shortcut the system, despite volunteering to hire a truck and collect them personally.

I also took the opportunity of checking on Phe and Bruce's whereabouts while at the Red Cross. Phone contact had been problematic – it seemed that SMS messages were the most reliable form of contact as lines were damaged right around Sri Lanka. But Red Cross offices around the country had never heard of any Australian medical team conducting clinics! Fortunately I received an SMS next morning from Bruce – they had nearly run out of medicines and were on their way back to Colombo in a couple of days.

We bought lots of school books, pens, crayons, readers and other school goods and returned as promised to Negombo the next day to hand out more aid. We also bought baby clothes and rattles, t shirts, shorts skirts and hats for children and sarongs for the old ladies, along with more toiletries and essential supplies. Our digital camera was in great demand as families gathered around to have their family photo taken. There was much giggling by children eager to have a photo taken with their friends. I subsequently had these developed in Colombo and mailed them to the orphanage for distribution.

Pip and I spent a sombre (and sober) New Year's Eve in Colombo sharing a National Day of Mourning with the Sri Lankan people. Alcohol sales were banned and any planned events had been cancelled. In place of festivities funerals and wakes had been the norm that week.

We were very happy to welcome Phe, Bruce, Sandy and Annabelle back to Colombo a couple of days later and listened with interest to their stories of the conditions down south (that's another story).

There was no rest for the weary as I had learned from the Archbishop of Colombo that there were many more orphans who had been shipped to Kalutara on the south coast so I organised another sortie to deliver goods and persuaded everyone to come with me. Father Silva had also requested toys for the children as they had absolutely nothing to amuse themselves.

By this time we had a good idea what items were essential, necessary or 'nice to have' and filled up a van with not only essentials but balls, cricket bats, kites, badminton sets, crayons and colouring books, puzzles and soft toys. Robbie had also arrived at this stage from Kiama with a suitcase of hand-knitted toys from a local craft group – these went to a very destitute but grateful group of refugees living in a temple we passed on the road south. We also handed about small bags of milk powder which disappeared in a blink, leaving lots of children empty-handed. The sadness in their faces will be with me forever.

We drove into St Vincent's Technical school in Kalutara and were once again warmly welcomed by priests struggling to keep up with the flood of refugees from the coast. At least they had been able to procure, through a local politician, tents donated by the Chinese government – I was really envious on behalf of Don Bosco school! We had a quick tour of the camp and spent the afternoon assisting nuns and other volunteers in re-packing donated sugar and rice into large bags for storage.

We had fortuitously met Simon Bouda, a Channel 9 reporter from Sydney, a few days earlier in Colombo who also visited St Vincent's and filmed a rather nice story of a snapshot of life in a well run refugee camp. Coincidentally his daughter goes to St Vincent's in Sydney and this obvious connection has led to the Sydney school fundraising to provide scholarships for newly orphaned children now living at St Vincents, Kalutara – a nice synchronicity.

We were all pretty emotionally drained by this stage and decided to go inland for a bit of a break. We reasoned that the economy needed our tourist dollars and travelled to Kandy via the elephant orphanage. This was to be one of the nicest days I had. The baby elephants were so cute and bathing them in the river was a highlight.

Any guilt we felt in having a bit of a holiday was soon allayed by the reception we had from shop keepers and hotel workers. Tourists were few and far between and the economy was really suffering. In one shop I was their only customer that day. It was hard not to buy everything in the shop! I had a massage in the hotel and my masseuse told me she has cancer and pays for her chemotherapy from money earned from tourists. We both left each other in tears, but at least I could give her a sizeable tip.

We travelled on to Habarana and the Cultural triangle. The story was the same everywhere. No-one was earning any money and workers were desperate. They were all resigned to having no income and returning to their homes until the situation improved. No-one resented us visiting them.

We spent the next two weeks in Sri Lanka travelling to various villages on the coast, buying up large in small town markets and searching out refugee camps to distribute similar goods as previously described. Camps were sometimes hard to find. People were afraid to stay near the ocean and had moved inland a little; often the only indication a

camp was nearby was a hand-painted sign written in Sinhalese, with an eye drawn with a tear coming out.

We expanded our buying to include sleeping mats, buckets, cooking pots, mosquito nets, shovels and other items we thought would make life a bit easier for refugees. We started a near riot in a camp on the outskirts of Trincomalee as we just did not have enough to go around, despite having procured a large amount of goods. This camp had tents although 20 or more people were sharing a tent each. They also had a water tank, but little else. It seemed that the more remote the location, the slower aid was to get through. We did not meet any Australian aid teams.

We had a wonderful afternoon in a small camp near Hambantota. There were only six families (about 50 people) living there and we had more than enough to go around. We were able to give the children a toy, some toiletries AND an item of clothing – we felt rich and I am sure they did too.

Finally it was time to go home – a decision made easier as I was starting to feel really unwell. It later proved to be Dengue fever and I spent 2 weeks in bed under the care of a tropical medicine specialist. We felt happy to be getting back to normality but extremely sad to be leaving such welcoming, resilient, forward looking people.

We treasure the memories of our time in Sri Lanka and have returned to Sydney determined to keep the plight of the Sri Lankan people on the agenda here and to assist in whatever way we can to make their lives slightly better. It will take years to rebuild the country.

Sri Lanka means Resplendant Island in Sinhalese but in Chinese it means 'Land without Sorrow'. We hope we can help in some small way to give Sri Lanka back its Chinese name!

Laura Cunningham



Bruce, Pippa & Laura Cunningham