

Homes for Victims

On December 26, 2004, television viewers worldwide watched scenes of the disastrous effects of a tsunami. News broadcasts left many viewers horrified as they watched wave after wave sweep away everything in their path. A great portion of Indonesian and Sri Lankan coastal landscapes were practically wiped clean, leaving villages bare.

The tsunami disaster almost swept away a culture into oblivion in this land of natural beauty, but it did not wash out a collective spirit of humanitarian aid.

The disaster sparked a strong international humanitarian reconstruction effort worldwide.

John Wutzer, mechanical engineer, Europe District was one individual who had an opportunity to do more than watch.

Wutzer said he was in between jobs and had the opportunity to take leave without pay to help with the relief efforts before joining his new position in Germany.

In March, Wutzer left for Sri Lanka to work for an organization called Global Crossroad. The organization is headquartered in the United States and also draws volunteers from Canada and England. Wutzer's two-week phase had 26 volunteers. The organization provides volunteers with an opportunity to donate their time and money to a much-needed cause - people helping people in the aftermath of a disaster that

claimed approximately 300,000 lives.

"My engineer skills were used in a positive manner. It was a great experience for anyone to take part in because I gained some true life awareness. I experienced first hand a country beset by destruction," said Wutzer.

The group arrived in the southwest coastal city of Galle, a former Dutch settlement that used to boast of a robust population, but recently suffered a loss of 5,000 inhabitants.

"In that town an entire train was swept off its track taking 1000 people with it," Wutzer said.

Even amidst the ruins and the rebuilding process, Sri Lanka greeted new visitors with its fascinating beauty. However, the mission of the group was to build homes, and taking in the surroundings would have to wait.

"One house would normally

Story by Brian H. Temple

take about an average of one month to build," said Wutzer, but his group put construction on the fast track. In order to build more homes more effectively they spread out the labor among three to five homes at the same time.

The crew finished about two a month Wutzer said.

Building a home consisted of block laying, mortar mixing, hauling materials, constructing the scaffoldings, erecting wood forms, painting and various other tasks.

The heat was so intense that Wutzer admitted it soon became the norm to drink six to eight liters of water a day while taking frequent breaks to beat the heat. The work was hard, and it was hot and so the volunteers took some time adjusting to the labor-demanding coed construction site.

"The heat, the mud, the

Global Crossroad volunteers finish two homes a month. A simple but effective home consists of blocks, mortar, unfinished wood, a sheet metal roof, and woodframed windows are installed last. Materials cost \$4,500 contributed by each volunteer and Sri Lanka's government.

Photo by John Wutzer



bright sun and various other site related challenges, all broke you from a clean, normal home life,” said Wutzer.

The group’s aim was to build and offer homes for the Sri Lankan population that would provide a clean environment. Each home completed is a 500 square foot cinder block, single story structure with a living room, two bedrooms and a kitchen.

“A typical home was usually constructed with rock, mortar and unfinished wood,” Wutzer said.

The group used large rocks and mixed them with mortar to form a rectangular shaped foundation. Then the block walls were constructed in a typical staggered fashion using mortar again as the bonding agent.

Other materials used for building were red clay brick tile, corrugated sheets and roofing materials supported by timber beams.

The walls are then sealed with a lime based primer and then painted with a color coat. Stained doors are then installed, one on the front and one in the rear.

The cement floor is finished with a maroon coloring. Wood frame windows are placed accordingly and glass is installed last.

Each plot cost \$3,000 and the materials for the home cost \$4,500. Volunteers also paid a \$900 application fee which covered lodging, meals, and transportation, Wutzer said.

As the work progressed, the group could see at the end of each day the progress they made on the homes.

After completion, a home was turned over to a family by a lottery system. The Magalle refugee camp in Galle held a



A Global Crossroad volunteer mixes mortar to place used rock and cinder blocks to form the wall of a home in one of the devastated regions of Sri Lanka.

lottery to identify who would get the next home.

Wutzer said he and his colleagues had their first glimpse at the refugee conditions during a visit to the camp.

“We had our first exposure to the direct tsunami aftermath and how the people were living together,” Wutzer said.

However, the experience had some positive aspects to it.

The most positive experience, according to Wutzer, came when the first newly constructed house was turned over to a selected owner. This became a ceremony where most of the village inhabitants were present for an organized ribbon cutting ceremony.

“Even the Minister of Public Administration and Housing Affairs was there accompanied with his local Buddhist representative dressed in the traditional orange robe,” said Wutzer.

Each official delivered a speech thanking the organization and the volunteers for their efforts and for coming so far to help. The

family receiving the house was also in attendance and expressed their sincere thanks as well. A small lunch was prepared to celebrate completion.

“The hard work that takes a person out of their comfort zone forces a person to open new doors and develop new routines. The whole experience of volunteering and being involved in a cultural exchange brings tremendous positive emotions that are still felt today, even after returning home,” said Wutzer.

The whole humanitarian rebuilding experience far outweighed the discomforts. The country’s charm quickly turned life into an exotic existence, he said.

“These are experiences that will be cherished for a lifetime,” he said.

Wutzer is sure that the Sri Lankan people were very appreciative of their efforts. His assurance came from their smiles and non verbal thanks held in their bright eyes.

“I will never forget that,” Wutzer said.