

One year after the tsunami, many Sri Lankans are



*water*

*damage*

rebuilding their homes and their



lives. But their emotional suffering is far from over

By Dan Bortolotti



**ON DECEMBER 26, 2004**, the train Sri Lankans call Queen of the Sea was travelling from the capital, Colombo, to Galle, along the country's beautiful southwest coast. When it reached the tiny fishing village of Peraliya around mid-morning, the red-and-blue diesel engine No. 591 clattered to a stop. Moments later, the sea that had long given life to Peraliya reached out and took it back.

Usha Kumani and her three children were visiting Usha's mother when the waves carried them out of the house, all the way to where the train was stopped. Usha managed to find a handhold, but her three little girls were swept from her grasp. Many of Peraliya's 500 families found themselves caught between the rising water and the railway and, with nowhere else to run, scrambled aboard and on top of the already crowded carriages. Somehow the train survived the first wave, but a subsequent one toppled it, drowning almost 1,500 people.

The first wave washed right into K.P.W. Rani's Peraliya house, where it struck her and Harini, her 23-year-old daughter. Her sons Anil, 21, and Kamal, 19, were away from the house at the time, but rushed back to help Harini as soon as the sea allowed. About 20 minutes later, the second wave drowned all three siblings. Rani was pushed out of the house but managed to hold on to a small tree. All she has left of the children is Kamal's navy ID card and an envelope with three laminated photos.

Perhaps 100 metres from Rani's new home—relief workers have built semi-permanent wooden shelters throughout the village—there's a concrete pad that used to be the foundation of Gallage Anulawathie's house. When the sea surged, the 45-year-old woman fled with other panicked villagers, but her mother stayed behind; family members believe she may have tried to protect the home by blocking the door. Gallage found her mother's body when they returned.

That day, Peraliya lost more than 2,500 people. About 450 families—90 per cent of the village—were left homeless. Sri Lankans are an island people, but they didn't immediately get back onto the sea—it took several weeks after the tsunami until fishing vessels once again dotted the horizon. The grief that is felt throughout the little village is so profound that it will probably linger for a generation or more. And this, the psychological impact on the survivors, is a side of the story that has been under-reported. In fact, only 20 to 25 per cent of the media's coverage of the disaster addressed these issues in the 14 weeks following the tsunami, even though the World Health Organization called the emotional after-effects of the tsunami a "psycho-traumatic epidemic."

**NOW THAT** the emergency phase has passed, mental health has become a focus for relief organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross (CRC). The challenges are enormous. As the survivors move through the stages of grief—from initial shock to eventual acceptance—many are now dealing with depression and anger. Alcoholism, long an issue in parts of Sri Lanka, has increased the problem, as some survivors look to *arrack*, a locally brewed liquor, to numb the grief. This past April saw the first two attempted suicides in Peraliya, including one man who threw himself in front of a train (the route had reopened two months earlier). Petty theft, public drunkenness and occasional violence have been big problems. There have also been stabbings, bitings and other attacks that no one had seen up to that point. Alison Thompson, a New York nurse who has been at the forefront of relief efforts in the village, worried there might be a murder. And then in September, a 21-year-old man was shot and killed.

For years, Red Cross societies have been training local health workers to provide psychological first aid to victims of Sri Lanka's ongoing conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Tamil rebels. Many of the families affected by the tsunami had already been uprooted several times in recent years, and many had lost relatives in the war. Now the tsunami has added another dimension—unlike during the conflict, there's no one to blame >



(From left) Peraliya villagers Usha Kumani (with K.A. Sanath), K.P.W. Rani and K. Chaminda show precious photos of family members lost in the tsunami.

*“You could see they were sad,” says Montano, “but they wouldn’t talk about it.”*



for the suffering. “In the areas where the civil war was going on, one thing people could always depend on was the sea,” says Judi Fairholm, an international Red Cross psychosocial consultant who travelled to Sri Lanka this past March and June to assess the needs of several communities. “They relied on their beautiful little island to sustain them, and it was like nature turned on them.”

When the waves hit, Fairholm’s colleague Lilly Montano, an epidemiologist and CRC delegate who has worked in Sri Lanka since 2003 with the International Committee of the Red Cross, was in the north of the country working on an exam for some of the Sri Lanka Red Cross trainees. A staff member knocked on her window and said he’d heard some distressing news on the radio. Suddenly, the trainees found themselves in the middle of a major natural disaster. “They had been trained to help people affected by war,” Montano says. “They were also able to help people affected by the tsunami with wound dressing, and they could refer people to the hospital where they could be treated by medical doctors.” However, Montano quickly arranged for them to get another 10 days of training, focusing on recognizing and identifying behaviours that usually follow traumatic experiences, such as irritability, insomnia, nightmares and lack of appetite.

This was crucial, Montano recalls, because people were deeply affected by and unable to talk about the trauma. “I had a very good rapport with the local people—we joked and laughed and we worked very hard—but they never expressed their own feelings. We had staffers who lost relatives—they had brothers, wives, children who had disappeared. You could see they were sad, but they didn’t talk about it.”

**THE FIRST** thing you notice about K. Chaminda are the vacant eyes under his green baseball cap. He says very little – his family explains that he is having a “psychology effect.” To tell his story he simply reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out the photos of his wife, nine-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. All three were swept away by the waves.

Chaminda’s story is not uncommon. “The majority of people killed were women and children,” says Fairholm. “We now have a significant number of men who are single, or who are single parents, which is not the way their society has been constructed. They’ve lost their women, who held the family together.” This is also true of some parts of Indonesia and India that were hit by the tsunami, where more than three-quarters of the dead were reportedly female. This is perhaps because women were less likely to know how to swim, that their traditional clothing restricted mobility, or that their lesser strength made it harder to climb trees or hold on to supports. There’s also strong anecdotal evidence for another cause, says the CRC’s Montano. After the tsunami, she visited a hospital in the north of the country and saw more than 400 bodies laid out. “I asked why so many of the dead were women. The doctor told me that a lot of them had died trying to save their children. Many of the bodies I saw had their arms reaching out, as though they were trying to hold on to someone, or trying to reach someone.”

Many children did survive, however. And it is these children who drew Kym Anthony and his daughter Callen to Peraliya to help. Kym decided a few years ago that when each of his children turned 18, he would take them on a trip to celebrate. When Callen’s turn came this year, she wanted to go to Hong Kong to watch the annual Seven-a-Side Rugby Tournament. After all, she was captain of her high-school team in Oakville, Ont. “But shortly after the tsunami,” she recalls, “my dad and I talked about it and neither of us felt right about still doing that. So I suggested we do tsunami relief.” By March, Callen and her dad were building houses on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka.

During their visit, the Anthonys spent a couple of days in Peraliya. “One of the hardest things was going into the medical centre and seeing the drawings the kids had made,” says Callen. “They had drawn the ocean and the train, and bodies on the ground. To me, those drawings meant 800 times more than any photo because they said so much >



(From far left) The old Queen of the Sea train is now a memorial site for Peraliya's tsunami victims. Lilly Montano of the Canadian Red Cross.

*“They can take it out on me,” says Thompson. “After all, they can’t get their kids back.”*

about the emotional damage to these five- and six-year-old children. They have to deal with everything they’ve seen.”

Nurse Alison Thompson, still working in Peraliya, has also seen the suffering of the village’s children first-hand. She recalls that in the days and weeks following the tsunami, a few outsiders arrived in Peraliya to help the kids, including a group of Israeli trauma counsellors. “The kids laughed and sang, and we took them to the beach for the first time,” she says. “The counsellors didn’t talk—they just used mime—but they got the kids to scream and then be really small and then stretch. They went through all these exercises. It was just amazing.” Other mental health workers arrived to work with the adults, but what’s really needed now is one-on-one care from trained professionals who speak Sinhalese. “With the translation, everything is lost,” Thompson explains.

Some survivors have even turned their anger and frustration on relief workers. “I really took it personally for a while,” says Thompson, who felt betrayed by people in Peraliya who said she had done nothing to help them, and who even accused her of keeping aid money for herself. “Meanwhile, we personally went bankrupt because we spent all our own money on the village. A lot of volunteers went home to get therapy because they just couldn’t understand it. But eventually I thought about the bigger picture, and I said, ‘You know what, let them take it out on me if they’re just angry because they can’t get their children back.’”

**WHILE ANGER**, grief and depression follow all natural disasters, the people of Sri Lanka are dealing with an added consequence of the tsunami: fear of the sea. This is both psychologically and economically devastating for an island culture that relies on the ocean for food, transportation and recreation. In the first weeks after the water receded, many people, especially children, were afraid to go anywhere near the sea, and even today, concern about another tsunami still hangs over coastal communities.

“At least three times a week someone starts running through the street yelling, ‘Tsunami! Tsunami!’ and people run for their lives,” Thompson says. “It’s very scary and very sad to watch, because the kids will be looking happy and suddenly their faces just turn to fear and they start running.”

It was crucial, then, that one of the first recovery projects the people of Peraliya began was their own tsunami warning system. Thompson is proud of the Community Tsunami Early-Warning Centre, which will have cost \$13,000 US to build, run and maintain as of April 2006. The villagers set up a computer that can access seismic reports, and volunteers have been trained to take turns standing watch. They’ve also strung a series of speakers throughout the village and up and down the coast so they can blast a siren if there’s danger. Thompson admits she’s not sure whether it will really save lives—even with some warning, it would be difficult to flee to safety in the village because there’s little high ground—but she recognizes it has tremendous value anyway. “It’s for their sanity and their peace of mind.”

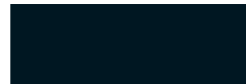
Having meaningful work is another big step in the recovery process, and it’s one that aid organizations are trying to address. Relief workers in Peraliya have helped dozens of people restart small businesses, including dried-fish shops, coconut stands, bakeries, turtle farms and antique stores.

And there are other signs of hope, including a new school for Peraliya’s children. When Callen Anthony returned home, she and her father threw themselves into raising funds for the project. Altogether, they raised \$800,000 to buy the land, build the four-storey school and fill it with desks and chairs. It should be finished this winter.

Meanwhile, not far from the site of the planned school, three carriages from Peraliya’s doomed train have been pulled upright and placed alongside the new railway as a memorial to the dead. This is a huge step forward, considering the train was once viewed as a curse by many in the village. And down the road, a homemade sign is strung between the coconut trees: “Let us rebuild our lives.” >

# lives changed

The tsunami affected people around the world, especially here in Canada, with our large Sri Lankan population. Here are four first-person stories of grief and survival.



**Tharsini Yoganathan is the 24-year-old founder of Tamil Emergency Medical Services, a Toronto-based not-for-profit organization that sends medical equipment and expertise to wartorn areas in north and eastern Sri Lanka.**

I was born in Sri Lanka, but my family moved when I was three – first to Germany, and then to Canada. Even though I've never been back, Sri Lanka is my home.

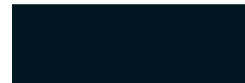
When you talk about Sri Lanka, you cannot leave out its politics. My father constantly listened to BBC News as I grew up, and because of him I kept up with what was going on. I started Tamil Emergency Medical Services in 2001, when I was 20. Peace talks had just started between the government and Tamil Tigers, and the economic embargo in the north and east was lifted. I knew the country had a lot of problems, and I'm a person who likes to help.

Even before the tsunami, the medical facilities in north and eastern Sri Lanka could make me cry. A hospital is one room, with holes in the walls. There are no local hematology labs, and all blood tests must be conducted in a lab in

Colombo, which is very far away. Blood samples are often lost or take weeks to be returned. At that point, the patients are often dead.

Thanks to a donation from the Toronto Steelworkers Union last August, we are now working with our partner organization in Sri Lanka to build a hematology lab in the north. The tsunami hasn't changed how we operate, but it has made more Canadians aware of Sri Lanka. Projects such as this lab are only possible with the help of many hands, and that is something good that's come out of the tsunami.

That said, it's still not easy to help Sri Lanka because so many people have so many needs – you have to be persistent and keep your mind on what you are trying to accomplish. It angers me that the Sri Lankan government is taking so long to distribute tsunami aid. In times of humanitarian crisis, you shouldn't be thinking about politics.



**Jeyarani Balasubramaniam is a 31-year-old mother of two. She immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka a little over a year ago. Her father was killed in Batticaloa during the tsunami.**

I moved to Toronto from Batticaloa in September 2004 with my son, Danushan, who was then seven, and my daughter, Tharshini, who was five. My husband had gone ahead of us; he left Sri Lanka in 2002.

Moving to Canada was very difficult. I was just getting used to being apart from my family when the tsunami

struck. I heard about the disaster on a Canadian-Tamil radio station. I was alone with my children in our apartment. I immediately began to cry. Then I picked up the phone.

For the next 15 days, I tried calling my relatives in Sri Lanka, but I could not get through. I called the Canadian Red Cross and the South Asian Women's Centre in Toronto and filed a missing persons' report with the police in Sri Lanka. No one could tell me anything. Eventually, I spoke to some cousins in Colombo, but they had not heard any news.

Finally, in the middle of January, my relatives called. My mother and brother escaped the tsunami; my father was washed away. The Red Cross and the South Asian Women's Centre phoned with the same news. It all happened at once.

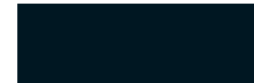
At home, the village howls and screams together when someone dies. Here, in my small apartment, it is different. After hearing about my father's death, I could not stop crying. My children were asking, "Why are you crying? Why are you not cooking food for us?" I did not get a lot of support from my husband.

In February, I joined a group for Canadians who lost relatives in the tsunami. We talked about grief and death and how to cope. I got some relief from this. At that time, my mother and brother were trying to immigrate to Canada. But my mother's application was denied, so they stayed in Batticaloa.

On April 16, my brother had a fatal heart attack. He was 41. Now my mother is sick and alone with no one to help her. Her neighbours have their own grief to deal with. This is

hard for me to think about.

Today I still cry, and I often dream that I am back in Sri Lanka, living happily with my mother, father and brother. But life goes on. My mother has applied to immigrate again, and this time I think she will be accepted. I am raising my children as my parents raised me, and I hope my mother will soon be here to see them grow up to be good Canadian citizens.



**Dilini Reynold is a 29-year-old Sri Lankan-Canadian doctor. Her best friend from medical school, Sifani Bongso, died in the tsunami. She was 24.**

I met Sifi during my first year of medical school in St. Petersburg, Russia. We were lab partners and lived in the same dorm. Like me, she was Sri Lankan, and her family still lived in Colombo. We were both only children.

Sifi was a beautiful girl with long, dark hair. One Halloween she dressed up as Pocahontas. She was very fashionable and loved to dance to hip hop and R&B. We had classes six days a week, but Saturday was our night to party.

During our five years of medical school, Sifi and I were together constantly. We would study late into the night. In the morning, she'd call me to make sure I got up in time for the exam. As part of our degree, we did some work in a morgue. When we came home, we were too scared to sleep alone, so she would stay over.

Sifi and I graduated with first-class honours on June >

24, 2004. My parents couldn't come to the ceremony, but Sifi's parents and grandparents flew in from Sri Lanka. They were so proud of her. They gave us both big bouquets of flowers.

After graduation, Sifi returned to Colombo, and I went back to Toronto. We were not apart for long. Two months later, I flew to Sri Lanka to do volunteer medical work. During the week I worked in Mullaitivu, where my patients were just recovering from the ravages of civil war. On the weekends I stayed with Sifi and her family in Colombo.

I returned to Toronto in November, and Sifi had planned to visit me this past January. We e-mailed every day. On Christmas Day, Sifi travelled south to Hambantota to attend a gala at a glamorous hotel. She was very excited about it.

When I heard about the tsunami, my first thoughts were not of Sifi, but of my patients in Mullaitivu. Most of the town had been washed away. But on Dec. 27, a friend from medical school called to say Sifi was missing.

That day, Sifi's father drove from Colombo to Hambantota. He couldn't find her, but he was hopeful that she was still alive. Nobody wants to believe a bad thing. Some of our friends from medical school also started searching for Sifi. They walked around the ravaged town, showing her picture and asking if anyone had seen her.

They eventually found Sifi in a morgue piled high with decomposing bodies. They were only able to identify her because of her earrings and the colour of her nail polish.

Sadly, Sifi's family had to bury her in Hambantota

because her body couldn't withstand the long trip back to Colombo. I wasn't there for her funeral, but I held a memorial service for Sifi at my church here, and I sent a copy of the memorial booklet to her parents in Sri Lanka. I still talk to them every week and I think of Sifi always. Everything reminds me of her. We had so many plans.



**Chitra Sekhar is a child psychotherapist in Ottawa. She travelled to Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, in May 2005 to train social workers, teachers and nurses in play therapy techniques.**

This was my fifth trip to Sri Lanka, and my first since the tsunami. The children of Sri Lanka have been through so much, not just the tsunami. This is not the first time they have been uprooted, not the first time they've lost family members without a chance to say goodbye.

What was different this time is that unlike war, the children cannot make sense of the tsunami. In war, you can say that one party did one thing, and the other party retaliated by doing something else. But the children don't know why something they loved – the sea – did something so horrible. And it happened so quickly.

One day, I asked the children to tell me a story. I started by saying, "Once upon a time there was a beautiful village by the sea." I asked them to give the village a name and to tell me who lived there. But when I asked the children what happened next, they said the sea rose up and

everyone died. I would not let them end the story there. I asked them where the village children went to school and whether they had any celebrations. Then they really got into it. They told me about celebrating harvest festivals and Christmas and going to temple. It's important for children to remember that there were happy days before the tsunami, and that they will have good times again. This is important to the healing process.

Another day, I had the children make paper flowers. In the petals they wrote things that were new – and positive – in their lives. They wrote about how they've met people who are helping them and how they've made new

friends in the refugee camps.

At the end of my trip, we held a celebration. We blew soap bubbles and flew kites and wrote messages for those who were lost. The children told me about foods they enjoyed during happier times – sweets made with sugar-cane juice, crispy cakes, chocolate milk and ice cream – and we had them. These may be small things, but they're important.

When I came back to Ottawa in July, I felt even more connected to the children I work with here. It was hard to leave them for those three months, especially the younger ones. They were so happy to have me back, but now another group of children in Sri Lanka is awaiting my return. MAUREEN HALUSHAK

## make a difference

- \* In the aftermath of last December's tsunami, Canadians were moved to action. We squeezed donations out of our post-Christmas paycheques. We held fundraising events at work, at school and in our communities. We raided our coin jars and turned over our lunch money. And we pushed our government to search for spare dollars under the cushions on Parliament Hill, too. All told, we donated \$213 million. The government has matched that figure and has made a total donation of \$425 million. The amazing thing is, it wasn't really all that hard to come up with the cash – and we all felt good doing it.
- \* Let's extend that good feeling this year. Take Chatelaine's Make a Difference challenge: take the amount of money you donated to tsunami relief last year and donate the same amount this year to the charity or cause of your choice. Choose a homeless shelter in your community. Or help fight AIDS in Africa with a donation to the Stephen Lewis Foundation. Buy books for your local school. You'll make the world a better place. And you'll feel great. What's not to like about that?
- \* Not sure who to give to or where to start? Visit our Make a Difference Centre at [www.chatelaine.com/makeadifference](http://www.chatelaine.com/makeadifference).