

Feature

The wave and the Relief

Five years ago this month Chilliwack residents responded to the devastating tsunami that claimed the lives of 230,000 people in South East Asia with an outpouring of generosity. Recently, journalists Lorene and Justin Keitch visited the small Sri Lankan town where much of that generosity was directed through the 'Hands Across the Water' campaign. This is what they found.

Lorene Keitch

Special to The Progress

Within gated confines sits an unremarkable house, concrete walls painted a cheery yellow and a postage patch of grass out front. Through the barred windows you can see children laughing and playing.

Amitha Ranushki is one of the happiest looking kids playing inside. She is the youngest of three kids, with a father too sick to work. But here at the Beach Children's Educational Centre in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, she is provided free early education including uniform, school supplies and a meal two times a week.

Amitha is one of 23 children attending the small preschool. The kids come from the slums of Moratuwa, a city on the outer reaches of the nation's capital. While you might see these two to six year olds playing or singing inside, what you are really seeing is kids from impoverished families getting a chance at a future. And without the community of Chilliwack, this centre might never have been rebuilt.

No one saw it coming. Countries bordering the Indian Ocean were caught by surprise on December 26, 2004 when an undersea earthquake created a massive tsunami, with waves reportedly reaching as high as 30 metres. Nearly 230,000 people in 14 countries were killed. In the small island nation of Sri Lanka alone more than 35,000 were confirmed dead and a staggering 516,000 displaced.

The Beach Children's Educational Centre, an early education school with space for 12 children was closed for the

Christmas holidays when the tsunami hit and completely destroyed it.

The wave also wiped out the meagre little the families in this fishing community clung to including household items, animals and their cobbled together bits of wall they called their homes.

"Almost all the children lost everything," teacher Lakmali Cooray recalls. "Because of the tsunami, the poor became more and more poor."

Waves of compassion from around the world followed one of the deadliest natural disasters in Earth's recorded history. Chilliwack stepped up to help too; more than \$70,000 was raised in this community through the *Chilliwack Progress* Hands Across the Water fund and direct donations to local non-profit organization Hungry for Life International.

The Progress partnered with Hungry for Life International to distribute the money, which went to rebuild the Beach Children's Educational Centre. It was enough for the centre to relocate to another house further from the beach, and open its doors to twice as many children. Funds also went to relief aid, a feeding program, fishing equipment and bicycles for fishermen and traders.

The children that attend the Beach Children's Educational Centre come from a "destitute" background, Cooray states. Families live in rows of makeshift squatter houses. The sandy pathways between homes lead to the water's edge, where mounds of garbage grow and stray dogs roam. Shacks smaller than a garden shed house anywhere from three to 10 people. Walls are



made of scrap wood, cracks of light stream in through the holes, and cheap ripped plastic lines the ceilings in an attempt to keep out the rain. Drug users and alcoholics live here, and children are often swept into this lifestyle, the teacher tells us.

The community is isolated from the greater Moratuwa city by a clear geographical marker: it sits between the railroad tracks and the water, effectively cutting off the squatters from the rest of the world.

In a squatter's home no bigger than a single car garage, three-year old student Upsaika lives with her parents and two siblings. Mother Madu Perera says her daughter would not be going to school if it were not for the free education offered at the centre. The family is "helpless," Perera tells me. But here, her daughter is learning and that gives the whole family hope that their lives can someday change.

Perera says it is risky to live by the water; their home is mere metres from the high tide line. But they have nowhere else to go, so they stay. Outside her door, waves crash a continuous reminder of the tsunami that struck swiftly and savagely only five years ago.

The students that attend the centre today are too young to



The Beach Children's Educational Centre in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka was built with donations from Chilliwack. PHOTOS BY JUSTIN KEITCH

remember the tsunami. Nadeshan Ramachandran was four months old when the wave crashed into her family's hovel, ripping the piecemeal structure apart. Now her daughter goes to the centre and it is giving her a chance at a future.

"I'm very happy to have her here because she's improving in studies," she tells me via translator.

Back at the centre, Amitha, Upsaika, Nadeshan and the 20 other students sing a song in

English for guests from Canada. This centre is far enough away from the ocean that you cannot see or hear the waves. And for 23 families, their hope is that education will take these children to a new place, where they do not have to live next to the terrifying sea anymore.

Lorene Keitch and her husband Justin were in Sri Lanka as part of a project through Hungry for Life called Pockets of Change. To learn more about their project, visit www.pocketsofchange.org