

East Bay: Project aims to help tsunami recovery by building a better birdhouse

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Sean T. Kelly has come up with an unusual venture to help a Sri Lankan village recover from the effects of last December's tsunami: designer birdhouses made from the catastrophe's debris.

Kelly, a Southern California native who now lives in Marin County, packs up for tiny Madiha on the southern tip of Sri Lanka next month with a pocketful of designs by Berkeley's Michael Parayno, who's noted for his whimsical bird boxes crafted from recycled materials.

Customers pay boutique prices for the fun yet eco-friendly attitude Parayno puts into his miniature works of domestic architecture. Kelly sees a strong market for birdhouses that combine that spirit with the qualities of being hewn from found local materials and hand-crafted by local woodworkers.

What's more, he's intent on selling not only a basic bird box but also a high-end model with a personal touch: The artisan will sign it and include a narrative of his or her family's tsunami aftermath.

Kelly plans to sell 1,000 to 2,000 of his branded Waveworks Tsunami Birdhouses at \$150 to \$300 retail, raising enough money after production and shipping costs to rebuild hundreds of human dwellings in Madiha.

"You can build a house for \$2,000, so if you sell 10 birdhouses you've got a house for a family," Kelly said. "To me it's an irony selling birdhouses to make human houses instead of the other way around."

Kelly, who's looking for donors to help with startup costs, hopes to have the birdhouses ready for sale by Christmas. They'd be distributed through crafts fairs, shops and online stores that sell high-end home and gardening supplies.

Kelly, 37, a writer and photographer, said his venture is an example of "natural capitalism - using natural products to make money."

He said the artisans will be paid a generous wage, overhead will be kept under 30 percent and the business will be offered to the village crafts people after the limited-edition birdhouses are sold.

Kelly contacted Parayno in May after reading about the Berkeley artisan's light-hearted, hot-selling creations. "One of the things that struck me about his work is he's able to have a sense of humor," Kelly said.

Parayno (www.berkeleyrusticbirdhouses.com) said the disaster zone poses no obstacles in terms of workmanship and materials. "We can make birdhouses as long as there's something solid -- sticks, seashells," he said.

The tsunami left 26 people dead and displaced more than 400 families in Madiha, a rural fishing village, Sri Lanka government reports say. Nearly 400 families had their livelihoods disrupted as a wall of water triggered by an undersea earthquake damaged fisheries and destroyed equipment.

Kelly sees his project as part of the second phase of outside aid directed at tsunami victims. He believes that once rescue organizations have done their work, creative follow-up is crucial to help knit personal and trade connections anew.

"How does a place recover once they're given Band-Aids, bottles of water and clothes?" he asked.

The idea that relationships are vital to recovery is at the core of Kelly's approach. It's reflected in the name of the organization he founded to apply the principles of natural capitalism: P2P Rescue. (www.p2prescue.org.)

In keeping with the theme, Kelly wants the birdhouse project to be small in scale and personal for both the sellers and the buyers. He also sees the potential for a long-term community bond to develop between Madiha and the Bay Area.

"It's kind of like adopt-a-child but it's adopt-a-community," said Kelly, who believes the model could be extended to other situations in which disaster victims must pick up the pieces once life-sustaining functions have been restored. These days, the catastrophe in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is never far from Kelly's thoughts.

"We're all absolutely torn here," Kelly said. "In a way we're a bit stuck. Our hearts do go out to those people. We don't know what we're going to do but we're thinking about ways we can help there."

The spark for Kelly's birdhouse venture was struck three years ago in the aftermath of his mom's death at 59 years old.

"She only affected a small group of people but the effect she had was tremendous," he said. "It helped prove to me that a small team can have a big impact."

Kelly emerged from the loss with a vocation to take on more meaningful work -- something immediate and tangible in its impact on people in need. He found his focus when the tsunami hit, and his background as a diver led to connections in Sri Lanka.

He enlisted as a documentarian and blogger with Scuba POP! Scuba to help the People of Pohlana (www.scubasf.com), a project in which Bay Area divers will travel to the Pohlana district of Sri Lanka to evaluate reef damage, train local people in diving skills and help create an underwater installation as a memorial and eco-tourism draw for divers.

Kelly plans to visit Madiha, a village in Pohlana, in early October to get the birdhouse project off the ground. He'll join the scuba project about a week later.

"Sean was inspired by the work we were doing," said project founder Francesca Koe, a master scuba instructor, "and that speaks less to my project and more to the enterprising spirit that Sean has."

"Each of us feels that it's wonderful when people make donations to larger organizations such as Red Cross," she said, "but there's something even more personal and more intimate and, for us, personally more meaningful when we can personally go and impact positive change."

"At the rate government assistance is doled out, maybe someone in their village will get a boat in two years," she said, "but what will they do till then?"