



September 9, 2005

P2P Rescue

Balancing the equality of the people who have the riches and those who don't.

By Bea Baechle, Editor

Long before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, images of the destruction from the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia haunted journalist Sean Kelly.

His intention and deep desire to help the people affected by the tsunami led him on a journey of serendipitous events that will ultimately benefit the people in his own homeland. But that's a story for 2006.

For now, Kelly is committed to traveling to Sri Lanka in October to both support and direct several not-for-profit projects to help renew the areas impacted by the tsunami.

“When the tsunami happened, I immediately wanted to help,” said Kelly. “I was so struck by it—it really affected me, as it did many people. But by the time I got around to volunteering my time, which was only a week, no one would take me, because so many people were already volunteering.”

A colleague of his, travel writer Jeff Greenwald, beat him to the punch and began working for MercyCorps, a nonprofit volunteer organization that alleviates suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive, and just communities.

Scuba diving project

In May, another opportunity arose. A different colleague from the consumer technology industry contacted Kelly about taking part in a scuba project in Sri Lanka.



Sean Kelly with a Waveworks Birdhouse prototype..

A team of scuba dive masters, collectively known as ScubaPOP!, is already there, donating its professional expertise to help the friendly coastal village of Madiha, in the district of Polhena. Many of the people, homes and jobs in this southwestern tip of the country succumbed to the tsunami. To this day, many of the children are still so traumatized, that they become physically ill just looking at the ocean.

The scuba project entails first surveying and documenting the damage to the coral reefs in the area to begin understanding and, eventually, re-propagating these precious eco-systems. The team of divers will then train selected survivors to become dive masters and create a viable dive-based tourism economy to replace economies lost during the tsunami.

The last aspect of this project, according to Kelly, is to engineer an underwater memorial dedicated to the lives lost in the area during the tragedy. “We feel the memorial will not only allow the local people and our team to honor the victims, but also provide a destination for future dive visitors to pay their own respects,” said Kelly.

“We hope this project will help the people in Madiha regain their trust in the ocean, which has provided the primary means of sustenance for many years.”

Kelly’s role in the project will include photographing the reef underwater as the divers survey the damage and writing about their activities. He plans to send regular updates on an online blog as well as seek some freelancing assignments for magazines such as *SportDiver* and *Scuba Diving Magazine*.



Just a few of the hundreds of unique, rustic birdhouses created by Michael Parayno from recycled materials.

“No one is being paid for it, we’re all just trying to get over there and do what we can with whatever equipment we can get: fins, masks, training manuals and larger equipment, such as air compressors,” said Kelly.

They have the support of Underwater Safaris, one of first dive organizations in Sri Lanka, created by science fiction writer Arthur C. Clark, who helped Stanley Kubrick write the screenplay for “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

The Indian Ocean Marine Affairs Cooperation, as well as private companies in Denmark and Mexico, have also shown their support. The government of Sri Lanka is aware of the project, but the foreign minister of Sri Lanka was recently assassinated, and the area has in the past has been rife with civil unrest due to religious differences.

Waveworks Birdhouses

To dovetail with this project in Sri Lanka, Kelly’s creativity sparked another idea. With images of the rubble left behind from the tsunami still engrained in his head, he read an article about a Berkeley artist named Michael Parayno who made rustic bird houses out of recycled wood.

Why not use the heaps of damaged wood to create birdhouses to generate much-needed income for the people who have lost their livelihood? “I called him (Parayno) up and he was all over it,” said Kelly, noting that most of the materials Parayno uses to make the birdhouses—from the wood to the decorative items that make each house unique—are junkyard materials. A perfect fit.

Parayno will spend two weeks in Sri Lanka in October to teach the locals how to make the sturdy birdhouses. In the meantime, villagers are finding the wood and identifying the woodworkers, and Kelly is working to obtain the building materials, tools and equipment needed to successful launch the project.

“Perfection is not the aim for the products as much as the soul connection,” said Kelly.

When the houses are done, Kelly will ship them back to the United States and hopes to sell them through a variety of channels, from art festivals and stores to online retailers such as frontgate.com and redenvelope.com.

He's working out donation levels, starting at \$150 for a birdhouse to \$300 for a birdhouse that includes a photo and biography of the artisan. Net profits will be returned to pay woodworkers, fund other local renewal efforts and build capital for an ongoing Sri Lanka export business.

Kelly admits that there's an endless list of details that need to be completed, and he takes one day at a time ironing out logistics, funding, wage considerations for the artisans, non-profit affiliation, how to obtain the materials, and on and on.

Although at times the two projects combined seem a bit overwhelming, Kelly prefers being in the driver's seat on a philanthropic project compared to the helplessness he felt when turned away from organizations that didn't need his assistance.

"I really wanted to help; I felt like I had ideas to help, but I couldn't help," said Kelly. "It had to be up to me. I think any individual can find a way to help if they really want to. And that's the hard part—if they really want to."

P2P Rescue

When reflecting on the purpose of his projects, Kelly explains that his natural renewal emphasis is very different from emergency relief and disaster recovery.

"While it's true that many damaged locations around the Indian Ocean have received a significant amount of emergency support, some will still require many years of help to aid in the renewal of destroyed economies and natural resources," said Kelly.

"A lot of these places were fairly self-reliant before the tsunami, and would rely on things like exporting tropical fish or growing their own crops," he continued. "Not only did they lose people and homes, they lost jobs and their means of sustenance."

So he created the umbrella organization P2P Rescue, which represents People-to-People assistance. He hopes to connect communities in the United States willing to "adopt" communities or villages still suffering from the aftereffects of the tsunami.

He cited The Villages, where his dad Lyle Chambers lives, as a perfect example. "If every Villager donated \$5, that would be \$20,000, more than enough to get this thing off the ground," said Kelly, who is planning fundraisers such as gallery events, audio projects and even a film documentary to help support the cause.

He hopes that P2P Rescue can become a model for natural renewal projects around the world, including the Gulf Coast. "We're a small team trying to prove that individuals can make a difference, however small. Maybe I'll look back at this and say I was over-ambitious, but no matter what I accomplish, I will feel good that I tried. And it's also my aim that those who helped feel good about it, too."

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