

# In the Eye of the Storm



Rebecca Kincade meets a local man intent upon making a difference . . .



On 26 December 2004, when the Asian Tsunami occurred, we all watched the scenes of devastation, stunned by the quickly-rising death toll. At the time, most of us were motivated to do something, whether it was giving money or donating clothing and blankets; but human nature means we have a way of forgetting and moving on with our lives, especially when those horrendous scenes are no longer flashed in front of us every day.

For Coleraine man Willie Gregg, though, forgetting was not an option. He was so moved by what he saw that he

immediately began fundraising, knowing that raising money back home would be more worthwhile than hopping on the next flight to Thailand. Over the past four years, Willie has seen what initially began as a fundraising mission developing into a fully registered charity; it is clear that his devotion and enthusiasm for this cause has not diminished with the passage of time.

## Charity starts at home . . .

Meeting Willie Gregg is an experience I won't forget in a hurry. A self-confessed softie, he is one of life's genuinely nice

people, who will go out of his way to help anyone in need. The first time I called him to arrange a meeting, he spoke for 45 minutes of his excitement about the up-and-coming fundraising projects he had planned for the next few months.

Willie is keen to make people understand that the tsunami was not a crisis that could be solved with a quick fix, but rather is one that needs long-term solutions to rebuild wrecked communities and lives. Fully immersed in the day-to-day running of the charity, Willie often works long into the night deciding how the money should >>>



◀◀◀ be spent and organising publicity, as well as any events which take place in Northern Ireland to raise funds.

When we met back in December, Willie was in the middle of what sounded like a million projects in the run-up to Christmas, his mind not occupied by the more frivolous present-buying and cooking plans everyone else had on the go. Between collection boxes, raffles and hampers, he was also setting up an Art Pal scheme to allow children from here to communicate with the Thai orphans through pictures they have each drawn. This is a man on a mission - and a mission he is determined will succeed.

### Doing it for the kids

Having visited Thailand on numerous occasions before the tsunami, Willie says his motivation came from seeing the places he had visited and businesses he had supported lying in ruins on Boxing Day 2004.

So two months later, in February 2005, Willie made his way out to the devastated Phuket with a cheque in his pocket for over £14,000 raised throughout Northern

Ireland. Rather than passing this money on to an already registered charity at home, he wanted to personally ensure that it went to people who desperately needed it.

During his time in Thailand, Willie came across the Duang Prateep Foundation (DPF), a charity working around the clock to provide homes for many of the children orphaned by the tsunami. These children, struggling to come to terms with the loss of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, homes, schools and friends, had been left with nothing, stranded and alone.

The DPF had originally set up a makeshift village for the children in an agricultural poly-tunnel while they tried to come up with a more permanent plan. Willie noticed the work they were doing and, satisfied that they were a completely genuine organisation, presented them with his cheque. Since then, he has been a fundraiser for this Thai charity and supports their work with everything he does.

His initial funds went towards building an orphanage large enough to house 20 children; however, many more have since arrived and it now accommodates

approximately 50 orphans. They receive sponsorship and encouragement with their education, learn creativity through drama and music, practise gardening (the growing and selling of orchids is a popular way to make an income) and find care in a homely atmosphere.

I ask Willie what the atmosphere is like inside the orphanage; he describes it as "a total circus", in the same way that any family home with young children should be. Laughter fills the air all day and if one child is feeling upset, there are plenty of others around to offer support and help. All of these children have one thing in common; as a result they have formed a strong bond.

### Learning to live

Education is something Willie places great importance on, keen that these children will eventually be completely independent and successful in careers of their choice. Many of the girls want to be nurses, while the boys are keen to join the army or navy. He is particularly pleased that four children they support have managed to reach university - the orphans' education is



often of a higher standard than those living with families, since they are encouraged to participate in after-school activities and, when they come home, they have a learning room dedicated to the enhancement of study and homework.

The hope for all those involved in the running of the orphanage is that the children will all be able to fend for themselves when they reach 18, so that they can begin lives of their own. It is anticipated that some of the children may even take over the day-to-day running of the orphanage when they are old enough, so that it becomes self-perpetuating and self-sufficient.

Willie is incredibly proud of the work and support provided by the house surrogate mother, Rotjuna, who he says has “taken on these children as if they were her own”. She makes sure that Willie knows if the children need anything in particular, so that he can organise either for it to be sent out or for money to be raised specifically.

And Willie admits that the biggest scare for the charity came when Rotjuna was diagnosed with breast cancer. In order for her to receive the treatment she needed, she

had to be sent to Bangkok for 14 months, where she underwent a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Had she not survived, Willie says he doesn’t know how this would have been explained to children already struggling with such devastating loss. Fortunately, Rotjuna came through her treatment and is now preparing to travel to Canada to counsel other women suffering from cancer.

Rotjuna’s support of the children is most notable for the fact that, just four years after the tsunami, she has taught the children to trust water again. Trips to a nearby waterfall to learn how to swim have been vital in the healing process for the kids; looking at Willie’s photographs of these excursions, I am blown away by how happy and playful they all look. I am amazed that these little ones are able to go near water again - never mind enjoy it - when it once displayed all the fury that left them with nothing.

With his plans for 2009 now coming together, Willie knows he has his work cut out for him. In the current economic climate, people are tightening their purse strings more and more. The most important

thing Willie says he needs right now are good Samaritans who will commit to a small monthly donation in order to guarantee that his charity continues to thrive.

Already planned for the year ahead is a wheelie bin race - the first of its kind and one that Willie hopes will be an annual event from now on - and a masquerade ball at Hallowe'en. He is also organising for 500 sponsored airborne lanterns to be released on Boxing Night to mark the fifth anniversary of the tsunami. Any money raised will be sent directly to the people that matter, to be spent on their education and wellbeing. Even the staff at the orphanage or, as Willie calls them, “the unsung heroes of the tsunami”, work as volunteers so that all the money goes towards, simply, what is best for the children.

To help Willies Orphan Fund in any way you can, please *tel: 07980004964*.