

# From horror to hope

An Education International tour to tsunami-hit Aceh was a life-changing experience for an Australian teacher and two of his former students, writes **STEVE PACKER.**



**F**or teenage Australian sisters Phuoc and Hue Huynh, Education International's five-day student tour to the tsunami-ravaged Aceh region of Indonesia in February was an experience of unimaginable contrasts.

"On the first day we went to 'ground zero' at Banda Aceh," says Phuoc, 19. "One moment you are looking at incredibly beautiful views of the ocean and mountains. Then you turn around and see nothing but muddy swamps, demolished homes and wrecked boats."

They also visited a mass grave that day, accompanied by Glenn Hokin, their former Indonesian

teacher at Bonnyrigg High School, NSW, and other teachers and students from the United Kingdom, Japan, The Netherlands and Canada. "The EI coordinator told us that thousands of unidentified bodies had been thrown into the grave without any opportunity for burial services. It was overwhelmingly depressing," says Hue, 17.

But the sisters also have indelible memories of playing basketball three days later against tsunami survivors. "We went to a community court where students go to watch each other play," says Hue. "Many of them had lost one or both parents in the tsunami, but their main concern was that they made us feel welcome.

They were smiling and full of enthusiasm—and they beat us."

The tour was organised for EI affiliates and students who had responded to the humanitarian crisis after the tsunami on Boxing Day, 2004. The purpose was to inform member organisations of the progress of EI's programs, develop links and encourage affiliates to develop further educational and humanitarian programs.

At least 220,000 people died in Aceh province, more than 20,000 of them children, says Hokin. "About 2,300 teachers were killed and 1,662 schools were damaged. About 100,000 homes were lost, as were the livelihoods of many people who live along the coast."

**Hue Huynh (left) and Phuoc Huynh (right) visiting schools in Banda Aceh.**

## Getting on with the job

More than a thousand non-government aid organisations set up posts in the region, but most have since left. “While the world’s lens may have changed focus, EI remains committed to helping the children and improving education,” says Hokin. “It’s something all member organisations can be very proud of. There have been media reports that donations are being inappropriately used. There is no validity in any statement which associates EI with such practices.”

“The work of many NGOs is floundering,” he says. “Some have found the bureaucracy and corruption difficult to overcome, though many of the NGOs’ difficulties are self-made. Some failed to do any investigation of labour and material costs. Artificially high prices were paid and smaller NGOs were simply unable to implement their programs. Many NGOs put up signs on land but built nothing, and many were too interested in self-promotion.”

Despite the obstacles, EI just got on with the job. “My people, my children, my teachers, know what we have done,” says Jerome Fernandez, EI’s Aceh coordinator.

The organisation is using its resources to return some degree of normality to the lives of children who have lost so much. It has almost completed the building of 28 government primary schools at a cost of US\$150,000 each. The schools—established as the benchmark in school construction in Aceh—each have six classrooms, a library, prayer room, staffroom and principal’s office, and come complete with furniture and computers.

## Courage and resilience

Children recounted stories of seeing family members swept away and entire families wiped out, says Hokin. “Each school visit was testament to the strength of human courage and resilience. The inspiration the children



provided to us was immeasurable. They are the new generation and offer new hope.”

EI has trained more than 1,000 newly appointed teachers. “However, the government must increase pay to attract more quality teachers. Some teachers are being paid US\$1 dollar a day,” he says. “Clearly, having to work as a becak [pedicab] driver to supplement your income does not contribute to quality education.”

More than 330 teachers have also been trained in trauma counselling. “This is a vital measure,” says Hokin. “Islam teaches that death is a part of the

cycle of life and is God’s will, therefore death should be accepted and people should get on with their life. But this represents a serious conflict for people who are suffering from severe trauma. The training allows teachers to identify children suffering trauma, who can then be referred for treatment. Children crowd around their teacher at the first sign of a storm. Others pick up their bags and run for home when rain begins to fall.”

EI’s achievements are clearly visible, and amazing, considering that it has only five workers on location compared to hundreds from some larger aid organisations. It also provides help to other workers through the International Trade Union Confederation,

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assisting local unions to expand as democratic, independent entities. Trade union officials will be trained in leadership, organising, health and safety, bargaining and computer use.

“The tsunami tour was a confronting, humbling and life-changing experience,” says Hokin. “The work must not stop with the completion of the schools. As students and teacher unionists, we must maintain our commitment to helping achieve education for all. The accounts of personal tragedy will live with us forever—as will the smiles and laughter of the new generation in Aceh.”

Phuoc is now studying medical science at university. Hue is studying science with a view to following her sister into medical science. “We want to work in hospitals and travel to other countries to pass on our knowledge,” says Hue. ●

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