

Kiwi Clown Brings Laughter to Banda Aceh

*The tsunami victims had never seen anything like it
And they were laughing hysterically.*

It's a sound that hasn't been heard here for weeks.



The Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami left nearly a quarter of a million Indonesians dead or missing. More than 400,000 people are homeless, and most of these are traumatized.

Enter *Elvo the Clown* and hundreds of children slowly emerge from makeshift shelters and tents to watch his performance of funny magic and balloons and soon there are screams of laughter.

"I've never seen a clown before," Huzaini, a 10-year-old boy said. "I'm very happy. Please invite him to come again."

"I'm happy because there was a magic show," said Azrikal, seven, holding a dog-shaped balloon given to him by Elvo. "It's so funny, I've never seen anything like this before."

And the kids weren't the only ones smiling, it also drew groups of adults, curious Indonesian soldiers and policemen. [As we all know the police are very often as eager as the children to participate and laugh.]



"The whole family and our friends came today to ease our feelings of sorrow. After seeing the acts of the clown, we have become happy again," said Kusuma Dewi, 37 holding an umbrella to shield her two-month-old boy from the sun.

Elvo the Clown is Aaron Ward, an Auckland, New Zealand performing artist who normally works in television drama, live theater and pantomime. He spent two months at World Vision activity centers in Banda Aceh, Indonesian.

Elvo reports:

"Kids have forgotten how to be kids in these situations. They need to see the light at the end of the tunnel - they need to be able to gain some normality - they need to laugh again.

"It's really important to make people laugh, especially in this sort of situation. Sometimes we can't pull ourselves out of those situations very easily, so to have someone like a crazy clown come over and help you get out of those situations, it's a huge relief for the people ... they just light up,"

"My role is not only to help children laugh again, but to help them through their grieving. It's about getting kids to realize the different stages in the grieving process - longing, anger, despair - are all okay. There's nothing wrong or strange about having those feelings."



Elvo is sponsored by World Vision, an international relief and development organization specializing in children, said his mission was simple but crucial - make people laugh. *Elvo's* performance was part of an effort to create a Child Friendly Space (CFS) in the hundreds of refugee camps scattered around the province.

Child Friendly Spaces are there to provide a safe place where displaced children can have fun through games, drawing, singing and other activities. The spaces are meant to help the children return to a sense of routine and normality, and hence help them cope better with the traumatic experiences they have faced. His performances will also help to educate the children on health and hygiene and other issues.

The centers are designed to help children who are grieving the loss of homes, family and friends to prevent them from being abandoned or trafficked.

Child Friendly Space (CFS) was opened in Lamno, in Aceh Jaya making 11 CFSs in Aceh, with around 1,000 children attending activities at the centers each day.

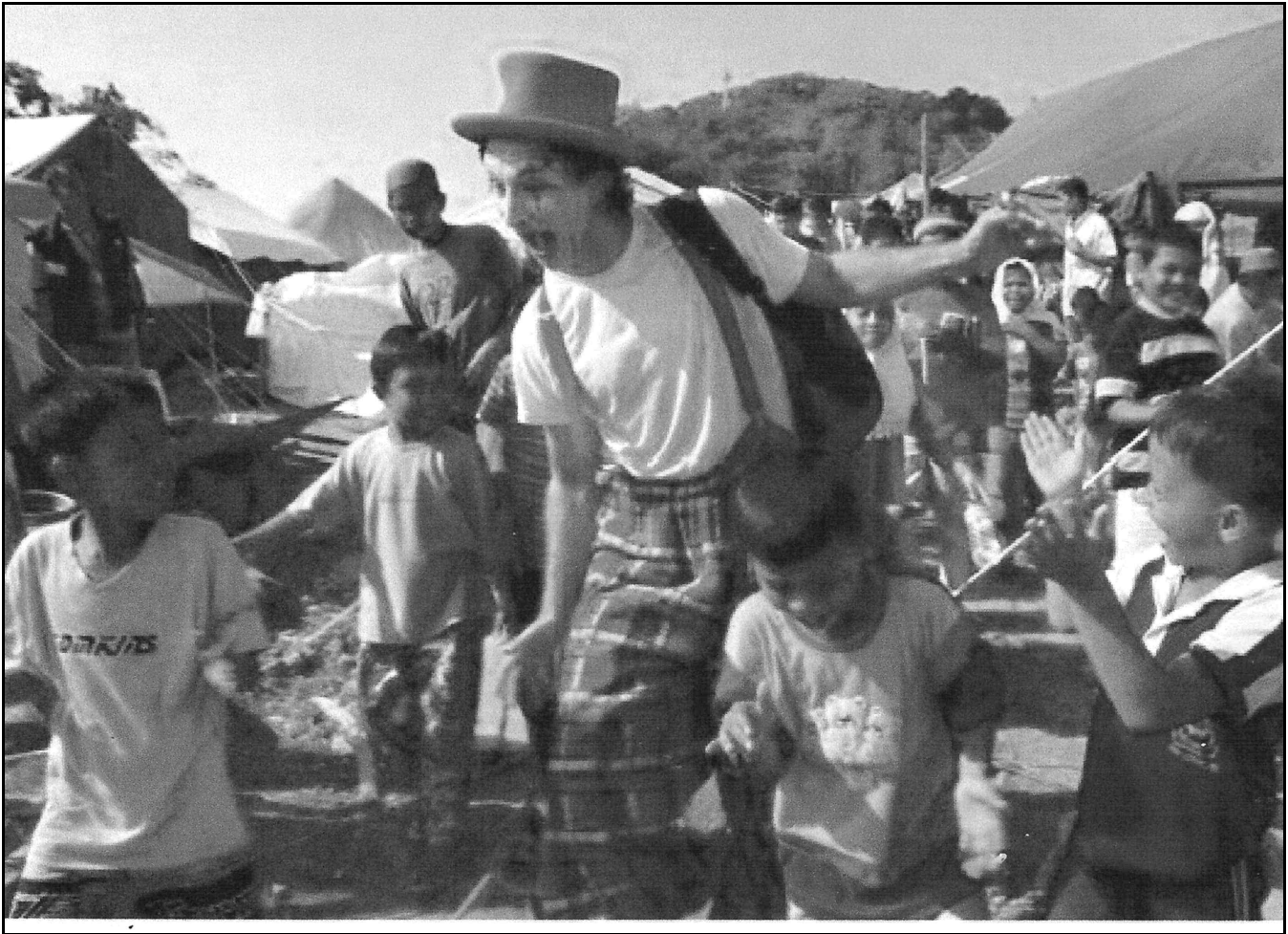


Photo by Mast Irham

World Vision contracted Aaron to support the CFS team in Aceh for two-months. Aaron has also worked with World Vision in Kosovo, in 1999, helping children cope with their trauma.

"One doctor told me he was having trouble holding back the tears as he watched the children he had been dealing with for the past two months suddenly laughing and playing," *Elvo* remembers.

Elvo reflects:

"I know in my heart that the fun and laughter that I have brought will stay with these people for many years to come and I like to think that, perhaps in some cases, it has been the difference between them being lost in this horrible situation and them regaining hope and carrying on.

"There is a lot that we can all do to make this world a better place. We just need to do whatever it is that will make a good difference to people's lives and to this wonderful, incredible and beautiful world we live in."

Although we caring clowns are not all trained or certified trauma therapists, we all have been in situations with traumatized children and adults, whether in a shelter, ER or ICU. In future issues I will do some research and have articles on clowning with traumatized patients. Hospital staff and administration will say, "You are not qualified to do "that," but in reality we have been working with trauma all along. .

Phyllis Kilbourn, a psychologist who works with traumatized children, uses a system to help her plan the programs which are used at World Vision Centers. In her book, Healing the Wounds of War, she lists four things which are important in helping traumatized children. Together they help STOP the chaos war leaves in a child's mind.

- S**tructure a regular routine in a safe, orderly environment
- T**alking and time a chance to tell their story and let their feelings out
- O**rganized play to express themselves and to feel normal again
- P**arental support at least one caring adult to support the child

