

. . . the Next Wave . . . a Wave of Love and Laughter

With the Wave of Relief, Clowns from Around the World travel to Tsunami Countries

*We Caring Clowns go not to mock tragedy, but to caress it with our compassion,
We march straight into the battlefields of grief,
Armed with unconditional love, and our joyful silliness,
We bring a reminder of the resilience and brilliance of the human spirit.
Gently tickling the heart and gathering forces in play, we give fear a hearty shove.
Ah, Maybe the trickster Coyote has a soft belly after all.*

— Shobi Dobi January 2002

There is no need to show pictures of devastation of the Tsunami. Everyone in the world had a front row seat on TV to the destruction of this Giant Wave that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Asia. What we are reporting here are the clowns who came in the next wave to offer their support.

What clowns? How can you laugh at a time like this? So many in the world just don't understand, and the news media has been reluctant to cover our work. If they could spend 10 minutes behind the eyes of any one of our clowns in situations where there is trauma. All hospital clowns are very familiar with the face of trauma - the exhausted parent who falls into our arms and weeps, the frightened patient in ER, the weak smile of a sick child. And how about "Clem T" (John Kapferer of Chatham New Jersey) who got into makeup after work every day after 9/11 and took the train to Penn Station, walked down to Ground Zero to give hugs and hand out red noses. Maybe if they could talk to the police officer from lower Manhattan who after years still keeps his red nose in his pocket to remind him of his humanity and hope in the world.

With this big wave, the news media (at least in other countries outside the USA) are beginning to take notice. Here is a comment from photographer Mark Reis: Sri Lanka Impressions (01/29/05)

"On Friday I watched eight-year-old Nimesh clutching a brand new cricket bat at a relief camp on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka. That boy lost his mum, his sister and his brother! All of a sudden I remembered being told on my first day here that what the kids in the camps really needed were cricket balls and bats.

"I recall thinking that was one of the silliest things I'd ever heard. Well, it was the silliest until the next day when I heard about groups wanting to bring mimes and clowns into the camps to entertain the kids. Victims have lost family members, friends and homes and their lives have been turned upside down. What were these people thinking?

"Well, it turns out they know a lot more than I do what these kids need. You see, all over Sri Lanka victims are being fed, clothed and housed. If they're to move forward, they have to be taken care of emotionally as well as physically.

"Today I watched kids in survivor camps enthusiastically taking part in music and art programs. What great fun they were having! All of a sudden mimes, clowns and cricket bats seem like a pretty good idea."

Following are some stories of doctors and clowns who went to serve in Asia with relief groups.

Helping to Rebuild the Spirits of the Tsunami Survivors

By Marilyn Tam of Airline Ambassadors.

[Selections from an article regarding Dr. Daniel Susott, Medical Director of Airline Ambassadors. This is one of the sponsoring agencies of Patch Adam's Sri Lanka Clown Trip.]

Dr. Daniel C. Susott is not your typical medical doctor. He's an extraordinary adventurer with a lust for life and an insatiable appetite to conquer new worlds as he tirelessly strives to elevate suffering wherever there's a need. I know his remarkable work first hand since we have been collaborating on various humanitarian programs all over the world: summer camps for at risk teens in the USA, providing support for orphans and women in Cambodia, and now on the tsunami.

This physician/philanthropist/actor/operatic tenor/dancer/author first became involved with the plight of the Cambodian people when he served as Medical Director for the United Nations Border Relief Operations (UNBRO) in the refugee camps along the border of Thailand and Cambodia following the fall of the Pol Pot regime. His incredible book, **Years of Horror, Days of Hope: Responding to the Cambodian Refugee Crisis**, details those times with eye-opening awareness.

He also speaks ten languages and will do anything for a laugh! I joke with him that he is so zany because otherwise the suffering that he has witnessed in his work will crush anyone with such a heart.

This past December, Dr. Susott and friends headed to Thailand for a scuba-diving holiday. As usual, he was exactly where he was most needed. What happened next was a mind-boggling chain of events, Here is his first hand account.

“. . . . [I] got sucked into a radical current and thrust, still breathing, into the emergency - happy to be alive and blessed to be able to serve.”

From Dr. Daniel Susott

"I was snorkeling far from shore when we experienced a massive current which swept our party quickly away from the boat. Just as we rescued the last person, the current reversed itself. We finally made it back at sunset to the beach we had left at 8:00 a.m. The wave had struck two hours later and the destruction at the beach was total. The office where we had checked our e-mail that morning was now without walls, the computers piled in a heap in the back yard. People died there.

“... I went to Sri Lanka to help. One motivation for going was to see my old friend, Sir Arthur C. Clarke [All you science fiction fans know him well] . . . Now 87, Sir Arthur came to Sri Lanka 60 years ago because he loves scuba diving. His eco-business, Scuba Safaris, was wiped out by the tsunami.

“As soon as I arrived, I saw Sir Arthur and checked in with Dr. Ariyaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya movement. ‘Ari’ is called ‘the Gandhi of Sri Lanka.’ Sarvodaya coordinated the most effective early and ongoing response to this disaster.

“Immediately, we drove for ten hours across the island to the city of Batticaloa. The areas hardest hit by the tsunami were the strongholds of the Tamil separatists who have been engaged in a war with the Sri Lankan government for 20 years. Some areas of the country were completely cut off from the supply of aid which had begun to flow in, bridges and roads washed away. As in Aceh, Indonesia, the separatist province of Indonesia, it seemed that Mother Nature was finishing the job started by the government and years of civil war.

“Amid the devastation were people picking through the ruins of their homes, dazed and forlorn. There were thousands of people in temporary camps--schools, temples, mosques. Above all, I remember a little girl, one of countless children who hadn't spoken since they were orphaned by the wave. Or the woman who lost three of her children to the wave as she struggled to save them--and then had her remaining child stolen in the camp. ‘Never has the fruit been closer to the ground,’ said one child trafficker.

“The rebuilding of people's lives will take years, generations. Beyond the physical needs, the emotional and psychological healing of the people is the main concern. What can one do, faced with the enormity of a disaster like the recent tsunami?

“‘Tsunami Salami!’ That's Dr. Patch Adams' name for our late March visit to Sri Lanka, clowning our way through refugee camps, schools, orphanages and communities so severely impacted by the killer wave. Patch says, ‘We want to change the world--not through money or power but through love and generosity!’ Patch's international team of 30 clowns includes eleven North American teenagers ‘who would rather spend their Spring Break helping others than partying! We want to teach American teenagers the joy of giving!’

“Giving what? ‘Love and fun--to rebuild the spirits of people who have been traumatized, to reconnect the traumatized people to life!’ He said, ‘It's a love invasion. We'll be kissin' and huggin' and lovin' em!’ Patch below gets a free nose honk from a young Sri Lankan.



Photo by Matteo Cavalleroni

Dr. Susott continues: “I got my own start in comedy in refugee camps and orphanages in Southeast Asia. I was heading to Thailand in late 1979 after finishing my medical internship. I had always wanted to be a ‘jungle doctor.’ I went to heal the suffering, disease and misery. But I stayed for the beauty and joy and the hope. And the laughter! I learned that if you can't *feed* all the people in the camp/orphanage, you can at least *breakdance* for them!

“The stories I heard in the Cambodian refugee camps moved me to tears and got me ‘hooked’ on the Cambodian saga. I needed to see through, to experience the tales of triumph which turned survivors into teachers and healers. So when it was possible to venture inside Cambodia in 1990, I went--getting orphans adopted and supporting projects which empowered families and communities.

“When I'd visit the orphanages, the children would say, ‘Dance for us, Uncle!’ And I did. And I played my accordion. I did what I could to bring some light into the darker corners. I was in Cambodia for most of the 1990's. The healing power of laughter is needed in all the regions affected by the tsunami.

“I never intended to make a life's work out of Cambodia nor did I expect to have a career in tsunami relief. I just kind of...fell into it! Or rather, got sucked into a radical current and thrust still breathing into the emergency, happy to be alive and blessed to be able to serve.”



Dr. Susott's picture above is entitled “Kid Massage” This was taken at a Cambodian Orphanage. He may not wear a red nose, but he works with the spirit of us clowns!

I wrote the following in a handout for a workshop on Ambassador clowning for AATH. I think it is appropriate here.

We are only ordinary clowns playing in an extraordinary world full of the human spirit. We see the spirit everywhere, grab onto it, and make it dance with us. We can be gentle or bold. We slide as a chameleon into a situation and bring our light and hope. Sometimes there is too much grief to play, so we hug and hold and cry. There is so much to do and so many to visit. A big job, you say? That is why we wear such big shoes, we say!

– Shobi Dobi 2003