

Tsunami anniversary: Village receives fresh start from across the world

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On the main coastal road to Galle, about 40km south of Colombo, tuk-tuks weave in and out of the noisy traffic, shoppers rush between market stalls and children skip home from school. It's hard to believe that 12 months ago, this road, about 500m inland from the shore, was awash with what little remained of Payagala village.

Just off the main road is a dusty lane called "Gisborne Place" - so-called because of the generosity of the Gisborne community - where 13 low-income families are gradually rebuilding their lives after the tsunami stole everything last Boxing Day.

"Our home was destroyed and all of our belongings were washed away, so we had to live in a nearby temple with about 500 other families for the first few months. Some are still living there," says Gisborne Place resident Anoma Nilante.

Like many people living along this idyllic palm-lined coast, Nilante's family did not have insurance when disaster struck last year, so the tsunami took everything. Since April, however, Nilante has been living in one of 13 brick homes donated by the Gisborne Tsunami Appeal with her husband, two children and sister. She is one of the lucky ones.

As the first anniversary of the tsunami approaches, Gisborne Place stands in stark contrast to Sri Lanka's overall reconstruction, and particularly its efforts to house the 500,000 people left homeless by the disaster.

A survey carried out by the non-profit Fritz Institute, a San Francisco group that provides logistic expertise to relief organisations, says some 78 per cent of those left homeless are still living in camps or temporary shelters run by

the Government or by aid groups.

"When I heard about the tsunami and how it had destroyed the village where I was born, I knew I had to do something," says Sri Lankan-born Gisborne man, Kris Gunawardana, the man behind the Gisborne Tsunami Appeal. After speaking to close relatives in Sri Lanka, Gunawardana, a computer network administrator at Awapuni School, approached his school principal, David Langford, about setting up a bank account so the people of Gisborne could make donations.

Within days of the disaster a relief fund for the families of Payagala was established. Gisborne Mayor Meng Foon offered his full support and encouraged the community to donate money.

"The first deposit of \$600 was raised through a sausage sizzle held on January 2 by Awapuni School staff," says Gunawardana. "Initially we thought we'd only be able to build three or four houses, but with the overwhelming community support and generosity during the weeks that followed, we exceeded our expectations."

Gunawardana says it was a fantastic community effort which involved the Gisborne Wainui Lions Club, Kiwanis International, and many schools and businesses in the Gisborne area raising thousands of dollars through various fundraising drives such as morning teas, collection tins, street appeals, and dinners.

"It really was great to see so many Gisborne people getting involved," says Gunawardana.

And it wasn't just people from Gisborne. In February, Auckland artist John Towers organised a silent art auction at Kerr Street Artspace. More

than 100 artists donated artworks to the auction and the group raised just over \$5000.

Another to team up with the appeal was Ian McGill from the Upper Hutt Christian Fellowship in Wellington, who raised almost \$6000.

In April, Gisborne Wainui Lions Club applied for the Government's support and received dollar-for-dollar matching funds, bringing the total to \$86,000. Gunawardana says all funds were channelled through the Gisborne Wainui Lions Club and the local Lions Club in Sri Lanka, which ensured that every dollar raised went directly into the building programme.

"No money went to administrative costs or overheads," he says.

Gunawardana and Wainui Lions president Tony Ford travelled to Sri Lanka at their own expense to check on the building of the first six houses.

"We checked that the appeal funds were being spent wisely and appropriately before giving the go-ahead for the final seven houses to be built," he says.

According to Gunawardana, having reliable contacts on the ground in Sri Lanka was the key to the success and timeliness of the Gisborne project.

"Within six months of the disaster we had built 13 homes, a community centre and library extension," he says.

"We were also able to donate 100 chairs for the school hall, security mesh for two of the school classrooms and internet connection for the school for a year."

Gunawardana also says that without the drive and commitment of the local community, headed by Kusman Silva, the chairman of Payagala Council, the project would not have got off the ground, let alone progressed as quick-

ly as it did.

"I am extremely grateful to Mr Silva for driving the project in Payagala.

Because he was keen to get his village back on its feet again, he was able to make sure we utilised the best architects and builders from the local area and get them for the best price.

"Indeed, estimates originally suggested that the two-bedroom brick homes would cost \$5000 each, but after further research we found the houses could be built for \$3200."

NZAid official Catrina McDiarmid agrees this community-to-community approach is what makes the Gisborne

Tsunami appeal so successful.

"When the local community is driving the project there is a natural expectation that certain things will be delivered. In many ways the community is what keeps the projects accountable," she says.

"There's a spirit to get on and rebuild and make things a bit better than they were before."

For Nilante and her family, the scars from last Boxing Day are still there, but are starting to heal. Her husband, who is a taxi driver, has received support to repair his vehicle, which was damaged in the tsunami, and he is making a

small living to ensure they have food on the table.

"We survived the tsunami and we have a home to live in. Thanks to the people of Gisborne we have been able to start again. We are happy," Nilante says.