

A Wave of Giving

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One of the hallmarks of true leadership is one's ability to serve others with humility and, by example; inspire others to do the same.

This is the story of Paul Bilney; his 10 days volunteering in Tsunami ravaged Thailand and how it has impacted his life and the life of many others.

Paul Bilney, 47 of Athelstone, is the general manager of Cowell Clarke Commercial Lawyers. He is fluent in Thai and knows Phuket like the back of his hand, having holidayed there with his wife Fiona for several years. It was this familiarity with the country and its people that prompted Paul Bilney to fly to Thailand at his own expense after seeing the devastation on television.

"My initial thoughts were that, because I knew the area so well and could speak the language, I might be able to hire a car and help people find their loved ones."

When Paul arrived in Phuket Town he headed straight to the City Hall Disaster Recovery Centre to see how he could best help.

"The setup there was amazing – tent embassies everywhere, about a hundred satellite dishes, thousands of photos of the missing people, DNA collection points for relatives, media everywhere doing live broadcasts."



Through all of this Paul eventually found the volunteer co-ordinators. *"Nobody seemed to know what others were doing or where the greatest need was – the scale of the problem was just too large."*

The call eventually came for volunteers to go to Khao Lak to set up a data processing centre to translate Thai autopsy reports into English. The one thing Paul had promised his family before he left was that he would stay away from Khao Lak, but that's where they needed him, so off he went.

*Leaders go where they are most needed,
often this requires them to move beyond their comfort zone.*

The next day while en route the mobile phone rang with a plea to send some of the volunteers on to a Buddhist temple which was being used as an open air morgue. Bodies were coming in literally, by the truckload.

"When I got there, there were bodies everywhere and more were arriving in trucks probably 100 at a time every hour or two.....The bodies were terrible because they were ten days old and they had been lying in the tropical sun. Where do you put three, four, five thousand dead bodies?"

The bodies were taken off the trucks as they arrived and put through various processes such as tagging, photographs, DNA sampling, X-rays, visual examination and bagging.

Paul volunteered to 'go in' – donning the protective garb takes a while, 3 pairs of gloves, full white 'moon suit', rubber boots, hair net and of course the gas mask. A fellow veteran volunteer who had worked there for three days told him: "form a picture in your mind of the most horrible thing you can imagine and then multiply it by a million and that's sort of what it's like."

The bodies were in a terrible state, the smell was overpowering and it was 'about 150 degrees' inside Paul's suit.

"I could only last an hour at first but after a while I could handle a couple of hours.....We were telling each other not to think of them as people. They had gone.....they've moved on, and what we have here is what's left."

Tears were confined to the evening hours, away from the temple.



There are also times when giving requires us to connect with people on a more personal, emotional level. Strong leaders not only share their skills, they are also courageous enough to share their heart.

"I stood outside a basement supermarket where eighty-eight people had drowned. A young Thai lady came up to me and asked if I was the owner of the store. I said no and explained the purpose of my visit and what I had been doing. She pointed into the dirty, water filled basement and announced that her baby had died in there. We stood there and hugged each other and cried."

Paul also recalls another 'moment' standing next to a mass grave near Khao Lak, watching scores of bodies being buried beneath humble numbered posts, while off to his right a fire burned, awaiting corpses for cremation.*"A very significant thing happened to me at this mass grave site. An official looking military man came up to me and introduced himself as the commander in chief of the armed forces in Phang Nga. He had two lieutenants at his side and a couple of official looking military photographers. When the photographers went away he lowered his guard and told me how the Kingdom was going to rebuild.*

He then did something I will never forget. He apologised to me on behalf of the King for the number of foreigners who lost their lives in the kingdom. As if this were not enough, he started to cry. His two lieutenants, who I'm sure, had never seen their commander break down, started to cry also.

I took what I thought was the natural step of giving him a big firm hug. The whole camp came to a standstill. I think it must have been the first time in the history of the Kingdom that a foreigner had hugged a Commander in Chief .

I went back to my tent speechless, shaking and crying. It is probably the most poignant and emotional moment I have had in my life. I will never forget that moment and the look in his eyes, for the rest of my life. It got me; it still gets to me now."

A leader's actions speak louder than his/her words. The actions of one person can demonstrate loyalty, trust, and respect which is then often reciprocated in relationships between people and countries.

After several days dealing with death, it was time for Paul to move on.

"The bodies were now over two weeks old and in an advanced state of decomposition. I could not visually tell their race and in most cases not their gender either. We had to unwrap the bodies to allow the doctors to take DNA and other samples. My job was to attach fresh ID tags to the corpses. This was a gruesome task. The smell and the flies were appalling.

I was coping until I came across a little baby. There was virtually nothing left of it. I picked up what I guessed to be a little hand and attached the tag to it. That was the end of it for me. I vowed that this would be the last time I would do this. I would have to move on tomorrow."

“Dealing with the dead is one thing but it was really important for me to do something for the living.”

Baan Muang ‘refugee’ camp housed many of the survivors from the hardest hit area in Khao Lak. There were 3,500 persons there, all had lost everything: houses, possessions, livelihoods and loved ones. This is where Paul went to work volunteering for a task of a more constructive nature.

“I saw that houses were under construction and discovered that the plan was to build 500 of them over the next few weeks and to move the people out of the tents and into houses as soon as possible. So, I joined the work crew putting in the floors for each room. It was a remarkable effort with carpenters assembling the frames and walls, electricians following behind putting in power and lighting, us doing the floors and a family moving in behind us as soon as each room was completed. Fantastic! I was finally helping the living!”



“Over the next four hours I must have wheelbarrowed two tons of sand, laid countless brick pavers and completely finished myself off physically.”

“After completing the flooring in twenty housing units I physically could do no more so I went to investigate how I might be able to apply some of the funds we had raised through our friends and colleagues back in Adelaide.”

While Paul was in Thailand, his wife Fiona was back in Adelaide raising donations to be distributed by Paul directly to the locals he was helping. After exploring several centers, Paul found an orphanage that housed about a dozen children who had not yet found a home to go to. Almost all were there as a result of the tsunami. In most cases their parents were missing, presumed dead.

“I spoke at length with the person in charge who explained each child’s sad story. He nearly had a heart attack when I asked him how 50,000 baht would assist in ongoing care for the children. He and his staff were overwhelmed that a westerner would just walk in and provide that much money.”



“It was yet another one of those emotional and touching moments – this big lanky Aussie sitting on the floor with these beautiful Thai kids jumping all over him. Lots of tears and lots of joy.”

"The next morning I felt very poorly. I just didn't have anything left. Having said that, I went again to the Patong Hospital; this time to find out if they would like a blood donation. I figured I had left so much sweat and a lot of tears here that I may as well leave some blood too!"

"This has been an incredible journey for me. On reflection I am very proud of what I achieved. I did things I would never have thought possible. I could never have done this without the amazing support of family, friends and colleagues, many of whom became very personally involved and inspired by this project. They should all feel very proud of themselves!"

More than \$14,000 was sent over to Paul who distributed it to the refugee camp, hospitals and an orphanage.

Paul and Fiona's actions have inspired many others to raise money and help in their own way after seeing Paul's story on national television and in newspapers around the country.

Since returning to Adelaide, Paul has also generously donated his time to share his story at fundraising events, raising tens of thousands of dollars more for the tsunami survivors.

I would like to thank Paul and Fiona for allowing me to share the very personal content of some of the emails that I was privileged enough to receive while he was on the ground in Thailand. Many of the people who received these emails passed them on to others and in so doing, Paul's story has reached thousands of people he hasn't even met.

Leaders take bold action and in so doing, they inspire others with hope, optimism, courage and a vision for possibilities unseen.

It is perhaps ironical that such a small movement in the Earth's landscape could create such a huge wave of disaster which at the same time has prompted millions of individuals to make small decisions to give in some way; ultimately leading to a 'Tsunami of Giving' that will change our 'human landscape' forever.

My hope is that this story will en-courage you to stretch and do more than you think you can; particularly in the area of giving and sharing your blessings with others.

Wayne Enright – **HealthyTeams**
www.healthyteams.com.au

If you would like to make a donation to assist children who have been affected by the tsunami, Paul Bilney's firm, Cowell Clarke Commercial Lawyers is making available its Trust fund to receive donations from within Australia for the '*Tsunami Relief Fund for the Children of Takuapa*'.

There were some 950 children left homeless in the Khao Lak area as a result of the tsunami, 300 lost at least one parent and 30 lost both. The '*Tsunami Relief Fund for the Children of Takuapa*' has been set up by local Thai officials and business people in Phuket to ensure that money is available to fund each child's education through to graduation.

For more information, please visit the web address: www.tsunamirelieffundthai.org

To make a donation in Australia, please send your donation to:

Thai Tsunami Relief Fund
c/o Cowell Clarke Commercial Lawyers
Level 5
63 Pirie St
Adelaide SA 5000

If you would like to ask Paul any questions directly, his email address is: pbilney@cowellclarke.com.au