

Tsunami calls reseller to Sri Lanka

© Comms Dealer 2005

Britain's populous was shocked and horrified by the devastation caused by last Boxing Day's tsunami in Asia, yet not many people have dropped everything they possess to help villagers put their lives back together. However, that is exactly what Roland Gurner, a salesman with Margolis Communications, part of the Margolis Group, has done.

Gurner has abandoned his flat, given his cats to a neighbour for safekeeping, and left his job so he can fly out to Sri Lanka and work with new charity, Build Aid - [www.buildaid.org.uk](http://www.buildaid.org.uk) - to help the people closest to the devastation recover their lives. Build Aid was set up straight after Boxing Day by Robert Muir, who runs his own construction company. Muir saw that people in Sri Lanka were in desperate need of long term aid through the provision of specialist construction expertise and equipment.

As a tsunami reconstruction worker with Build Aid, Gurner is taking on an intermediary and developmental role for the charity to help its voluntary staff settle in and its future work progress smoothly. He chose his own job, as he has no construction knowledge but still wanted to be involved with the charity.

"I posted some letters on the tsunami website, saying people should be able to go out to Sri Lanka even if they didn't have construction experience, but want to learn" he says. "Robert Muir contacted me and explained what he was looking to do and asked me what I thought I could do out there. So I said I could be the go between to help the volunteers find accommodation and get them accustomed to the area, and look for other projects we could undertake."

Gurner explains why he wanted to move to Sri Lanka: "I decided to go because I felt like everybody else, and I thought if you can afford to do it, you should go out there and help these people. I had some savings behind me as I sold my house recently so had no commitment there, then I spoke to the directors at Margolis and they said I could take the time off work, so I'm going!"

On the enormity of his decision to leave all he has and knows behind him for at least six months, Gurner commented just before he flew out of the UK in late March: "I've been working for 10 years and thought that if I wanted to do something like this, I should get out now. It is exciting but very scary. I've gone through the pain of getting the jobs done, so now I'm just worried about getting mown down by a bus! In sales, I think it's really useful to do something like this. It's good to have a break from the hard faced mentality of selling and come back from volunteer work, fresh."

Terry Dwyer, managing director at Margolis Communications, comments on his intrepid salesman: "I'm very impressed by the young man. He's giving up half a year's earnings, he's rented his flat, sold his car, and is going out there with aftershocks still hitting the

area to go and help, so how could I say no? He's a brave guy." He adds: "Rollie was in a unique position to go, but I wouldn't want to let too many of my sales staff leave! Mind you, for our competitors I would recommend that they let all their sales teams go and volunteer."

The local people of Sri Lanka that are receiving help from Build Aid are typically from the coastal regions, and lived in properties that the government of the country has not prioritising for rebuild funding. These people had their worlds ripped apart by the waves of the 26<sup>th</sup>, when they lost their homes which they are now putting back together with a wage from Build Aid for the labour they provide in helping to rebuild other properties crucial for the community, that are not receiving any government funding. This cash is helping keep families alive and providing the prospect of new fishing boats and nets for the future, to replace those washed away. In the future when the government begins giving these people money to rebuild their homes, Build Aid will work with them.

Local people in Sri Lanka are receiving \$15 US per ay to work for Build Aid. This money, and the money used to buy the materials to repair and replace properties, is coming from donations made by the public. At Margolis, people in Gurner's office raised £250 in a whip round. Margolis is sponsoring the charity as its pet project for the year, so Build Aid will receive a percentage of the business' turnover. Additionally, the company is donating money raised at its quarterly events trips doing silly races, such as the fastest time down a hill without breaking a bone, where suppliers and staff attend go cart days or travel to places such as La Manga, to Build Aid.

Build Aid's initial projects in Sri Lanka are focusing on rebuilding properties designed for public use, that are not in line to receive government funding any time in the near future. These public buildings include an orphanage that was built with private funding; despite its worthy role in the community the Sri Lankan government is not involved with fixing the damaged parts of the building.

Named Sambodhi House, situated east of Galle, the orphanage roof repairs alone are costing £12,000. Sambodhi House is home and school for up to 200 orphaned children, all with mental or physical disabilities. The live-in carers at Sambodhi House are also disabled in some way. The tsunami hit the house in three waves, killing 38 children and washing another 10 away, now all presumed dead. The orphanage roof was completely destroyed by the waves, plus it needs a new kitchen, the electrical installations need testing and upgrading, and its water system is contaminated.

Gurner says: "Once we've rebuilt the roof at the orphanage, we have to move onto repairing what we can there with the rest of the money we have. And when we've raised the money we need to complete that project and another one at Balapitiya Fishing Village, where 400 homes have been wrecked, we have to look at more new projects and get the money raised for those. We're now looking for someone with fundraising experience to join the charity, as up till now, all our cash has been raised through generous contributions and people like Rob and I working for free and paying all our own expenses."

Summing up, Gurner says: “I lost my mum three years ago to cancer and since then, I’ve been a lot more understanding of people’s feelings and the emotions they’re going through. Because of that, there’s nothing hypocritical that I’ll be feeling or saying to these people in Sri Lanka. No one will forget what happened in Asia. By helping, raising money at home for charities like Build Aid, or spending even a week helping in Sri Lanka, you will do your soul some good.

To make donations to Build Aid, volunteer to raise money in the UK or to go out and help the charity in Sri Lanka for even one week, please go to: [www.buildaid.org.uk](http://www.buildaid.org.uk)