

## AWAKENING TO OUR COMMON COMPASSION

The world awoke to the horror and grief of South Asia after the tsunami of December 26, 2004. Much of the global community watched the aftermath with sadness and compassion, wanting to do something for those weeping for lost family members and devastated lives.

Members of the University of Wisconsin-Madison community were no different. Students, faculty, staff, and administration felt a need to support the people of South Asia. The avenues of support have been diverse, but all have shared a collaborative spirit. The common lessons and stories of these tsunami response efforts are rich with life and meaning.

Students and staff were brought together by this shared concern when Rick Brooks, UW Outreach Program Manager, called for a campus-wide tsunami-response coordinating meeting. Faculty, staff, and students attended, representing different components of the campus community—from the Indian Student Association to the Morgridge Center to the School of Social Work. Syasana Fatkhi, student Associate Director of Promotion for the Wisconsin Union Directorate, expressed that all the student organizations came together in their common desire to help those affected by the tsunami. Fatkhi has since become a

leader in tsunami relief fundraising and believes that the core of these meetings was a shared compassion for South Asia.

The International Student Services Office took the lead in coordinating and overseeing campus response efforts after these initial meetings. A taskforce was formed to coordinate this common concern into real support for UW students who were affected by the tragedy of South Asia. The first priority, according to

Director of International Student Services, Pap Sarr, was ensuring the safety of all international and study abroad students who might have been affected by the disaster. Fortunately, all South Asian international and study abroad students were contacted and confirmed as safe.

On campus, students became a primary force driving tsunami relief efforts. The Wisconsin Union

Directorate's staff and volunteers were at the forefront of student fundraising. WUD's Community Service Committee and Student Performances Committee partnered to host a benefit concert featuring a mosaic of performers ranging from the UW Bellydancing Group to spoken word artist Eric Mata.

Student groups and departments plan to continue their support for the relief and rebuilding efforts in South Asia, even as many people around the world lose sight of the millions of people who still need



Photo courtesy of [www.sarvodaya.org](http://www.sarvodaya.org)

support. Student organizations, the Center for South Asia, and International Student Services plan to sponsor further educational events focusing on the lessons learned from the tsunami. International Students Services plans to keep their commitment to students by partnering with the Wisconsin Alumni Association and the University of Wisconsin Foundation to create the International Students Assistance Fund. This fund will assist any student whose financial situation was affected by the tsunami.

Eric Mata spoke at the WUD fundraiser about the necessity of remembering that the people of South Asia will need long term support and dedication from the global community, and also of the necessity in opening our eyes to the disasters within local communities. He reminds the university community:

*We need to start looking  
within the confines of our own borders  
and acknowledge those which are happening  
underneath our footsteps  
see there are men and women being laid to rest  
in the cracks we try to avoid  
as we stroll down university streets.*

His words touch on a common lesson learned by many who took part in tsunami relief and support efforts. When local and global communities recognize the needs of our neighbors and the common compassion that unites us, we can work together to impact individual lives and the community as a whole.

Rick Brooks, the UW staff member who initially called the UW community together to respond to the tsunami, believes deeply in this lesson. In addition to his university job, he was the volunteer executive director of Sarvodaya USA, the partner organization to the largest indigenous relief and development organization in Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Sarvodaya's founder and president, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, translates Sarvodaya Shramadana to mean the sharing of thought, labor, and resources for the awakening and well-being of all. Brooks explains: "We tell people in local communities: share yourself for the good of all. Sarvodaya USA exists both to directly support Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka and to facilitate

awakening and social change in local U.S. communities. Sarvodaya USA strives for social change for the well-being of all people, the development and coming together of communities internationally, and the awakening to our common humanity and interconnectedness."

Brooks' small university office, just up the street from the Red Gym and the Memorial Union, was converted into the Sarvodaya USA national headquarters after the tsunami. Since December 27<sup>th</sup>, Sarvodaya USA has received thousands of calls and emails, built partnerships, coordinated international volunteers and professionals, and began to develop programs like Village to Village, linking Sri Lankan villages to communities in the U.S. for the sharing of culture, community, and resources. With the help of students and other Madisonians, Sarvodaya USA channeled over 1.3 million dollars directly to Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka. Brooks predicted: "This is just the beginning. People around the world were deeply moved by this historical disaster. People want to help so deeply; people are inspired. We have established relationships and built partnerships which will support Sarvodaya in the future. We have spread the vision and the work of Sarvodaya to millions of people. And most of the energy behind tsunami relief efforts in this office and on this campus has come from the students."

This inspiration and the awareness of the power of coming together to serve others might be one of greatest lessons people have learned from this disaster. Whether it is student organizations at the UW coming together to fundraise in Madison, Wisconsin, or villagers helping each other rebuild their lives and homes in Sri Lanka, people around the world have personally learned these lessons. People throughout the university and the world have realized we need to remember these lessons. So that the lives lost and destroyed are not in vain, my hope is that we continue to honor these lessons in a way which focuses on the continuous awakening, solidarity, and common compassion for our global family. ❖

For more information see: <http://www.news.wisc.edu/tsunami/> and <http://www.sarvodaya.org>.