

# Paul lends a helping hand to earthquake and tsunami victims

By Lindy McNamara

The enormous devastation caused by the Japanese earthquake and tsunami on 11 March was almost impossible for the rest of the world to grasp and comprehend.

As foreigners left Japan amid concerns of rising radiation levels from the Fukushima nuclear plant, one of Adelaide's legal professionals took the bold step of heading in the other direction - to work as a volunteer in the severely hit coastal city of Ishinomaki.

Paul Bilney, CEO at Cowell Clarke, had previous experience working in a major disaster area having spent time as a volunteer in tsunami-ravaged Thailand. His love of the country and his need to help his friends there made volunteering an easy decision. For 10 days he had the gruesome task of helping with the identification of thousands of badly decomposing bodies. It was a physically and emotionally draining experience and one that Paul hoped he would never have to repeat.

However, as soon as the television images of the Japanese tragedy started to filter into our lounge rooms, there was a tug at Paul's heartstrings. He waited a few weeks until the danger from the nuclear plant had abated (only for it to be elevated once he was there) and put himself on a plane to Tokyo.

"It was a bit like *déjà vu*. I was hoping that Thailand was something that we would not see again and when I saw Japan I had to ask myself if I would be up to it again.

"I had never been to Japan before and could not speak Japanese and the situation with the reactor added a different dimension," Paul told the *Bulletin* on his return to Adelaide.

All costs involved with being a volunteer were met by Paul and he also had to supply his own water and food for the duration of his stay. The first day in Tokyo proved an exercise of patience as he needed to stock up with 20 bottles of water. Amazingly, in a city the size of Tokyo he was permitted to purchase only one bottle from each shop, although he could have purchased a carton of beer quite easily!

Supplies in hand he joined a team of 150 volunteers from the non-government organisation, *Peace Boat*, who were going to provide hands-on assistance in Ishinomaki, just north of Sendai. In his team were seven other foreigners – all who worked and lived in Japan and spoke the language.

"I was the only one crazy enough to fly into it," he laughs.

Paul travelled overnight in a convoy of vehicles laden with water, food, fuel, protective clothing and gifts for children. They arrived in the city of 165,000 people at daybreak and the picture that confronted them was heartbreaking.

"It was much worse than Thailand. This was a significantly built-up area and it was completely destroyed. There was metal, concrete, cars everywhere... the wreckage was extreme," he says.

For the next eight days he and his fellow volunteers used all their physical strength to scrape away a six-inch layer of "black sludge" that had been brought in by the tsunami. The idea was that if some streets and shops were cleaned, it would encourage residents to come out and mingle, talk about their ordeal and the healing process would begin. Up until then, most were sheltering in their damaged homes and shops and were keeping to themselves.

With no electricity and running water, each day was a back-breaking effort to scrape up the sludge with shovels, bag it and move it away. The volunteers would take a wheelbarrow loaded with jerry cans about 500m away, fill them with water and bring them back so the water could be used in the clean-up process.

Paul admits his "body hurt everywhere" but there were no creature comforts to ease the pain. He slept in a tent in the freezing conditions, there were no showers and food was predominantly instant noodles and English muffins. But he wasn't complaining as the locals had it much worse.

What surprised Paul on his arrival in

Ishinomaki was that some people had never seen a foreigner before. Residents, particularly the elderly, would come up to the volunteers and shake their hands because they were so grateful they had come to help.

"I guess it showed them that the rest of the world really cared," he says.

There were many "moments" during the week that Paul will never forget and talking about them bring his raw emotions to the surface.

A young girl, Yukino-Chan, who skipped down the road when she saw the volunteers coming to clean up her parent's shop has left a lasting imprint in his mind. He says despite the absolute hopelessness that surrounded her, this little girl was so happy that they had come to help and it filled him with a sense of hope.

Or a little boy, Ren-Kun, who went and got a tiny paint scraper so he could also help the volunteers scrape away the endless sludge that covered the road where he was playing.

And the couple of hours spent at a local school helping children with their English studies providing an uplifting experience at an otherwise dark time. While the school was not open for regular classes this diversion at least gave these children, who had clearly been traumatised by events, to have some normality in their lives.

"For me, it was a real mixture of emotions. It was devastating to see the damage as it was so massive and extensive. It was breathtaking as it goes for miles and miles.

"It was so sad to watch the people trying to find possessions in the wreckage. There was a sadness surrounding their hopelessness and what the future holds for them."

After a week of blood, sweat and many tears, Paul inevitably formed strong bonds with the other volunteers in his team, which he believes will last a lifetime.

"Volunteers have to have a pretty big

heart to do this – there is nothing in it for them. They pay their own way and it was dangerous work,” he explains, adding there were many times he wondered if structures they were working under were going to collapse.

And then there were the after shocks which pushed already frazzled nerves to the limit. Paul experienced two major shocks which he admits really scared him and he wondered if “this was it”.

While Paul has been keeping in close contact with his new friends in Japan and getting regular reports on progress, he believes the disaster has been largely forgotten by much of the world.

“Unfortunately it is off the radar completely and things really haven’t changed very much. It will take years for them to get back to some normality.”

Safely back in Adelaide, Paul and his fellow Cowell Clarke workers continue to raise money to help the people affected by the earthquake and tsunami, with nearly \$10,000 collected to date.

He hopes that others in the legal community will also find it in their hearts to help those affected by this terrible natural disaster.

If anyone would like further information regarding making direct donations for the relief efforts please contact Paul on 82281111 or email [pbilney@cowellclarke.com.au](mailto:pbilney@cowellclarke.com.au). **B**



*Despite the tragedy that surrounded him, Ren-Kun decided to help the volunteers clean up his street using his little paint scraper.*



*Paul Bilney says the happiness shown by little Yukino-Chan when the volunteers arrived to help clean her parents’ shop gave him hope in what was otherwise a quite hopeless situation.*



*The school visited by the volunteers was surrounded by wreckage that had been dumped by the tsunami.*



*The group of school students who had a visit by the volunteer group. While their school has not re-opened, they were able to participate in some informal lessons in the library.*