

Valentine's Day Tsunami Project by Pierce Salguero

Earlier this year, children in schools across America were asked to make Valentine's Day cards for children in Southern Thailand who were affected by the tsunami. This project received world-wide support and generated an immeasurable amount of compassion among the youth in our local communities. My wife and I were able to personally deliver many of these valentines on a recent trip to several schools in the Khao



Children having fun with their cards and gifts.
Photo by Pierce Salguero

Lak area in Phang-Nga Province. The result of this initiative was an overwhelming success which left an impression of friendship and hope on the children of southern Thailand.

For several years, our organization has been involved in building bridges between Southeast Asia and the West, but we had never before carried out relief efforts for the needy. Our organization focuses on educational programs and academic research of traditional Thai medicine. We are also involved in charitable activities of benefit to the Thai people, in gratitude for the knowledge they have shared with us, and for the profound effect this has had on our lives.

When the tsunami hit, we wanted to respond to what was clearly one of the worst disasters in recorded history. Soon after the disaster, organizations such as the Red Cross, UNICEF, etc., discouraged donations of food and clothing, and instead petitioned for cash in order to fund the delivery of goods already in stock. However, once immediate needs of survival had been met, the focus of relief efforts changed. We felt that the psychological well being of the children in these devastated areas also needed to be addressed. According to UNICEF, 35% of those who died as a result of the tsunami were children, and over 1.5 million child survivors were displaced from their homes. This is a staggering number of newly-orphaned and newly-homeless children who are now struggling to understand and come to terms with their new reality. With this in mind, we asked American children to send Valentine's Day cards, draw pictures, make collages and other art projects to express their solidarity and support for the Thai children affected by this disaster. We collected close to ten thousand Valentines cards from schools across the US and from countries as far away as Japan.

On Valentine's Day, 2005, we traveled to the most heavily-affected areas of southern Thailand and delivered cards to several schools in the Khao Lak area in Phang-Nga Province. We met with representatives from the Mirror Foundation, a Thai-owned non-profit, who introduced us to a Thai English teacher in the affected villages. She accompanied us into the schools and served as our translator as we distributed the Valentine's cards to the children.

As a result of this effort, we were able to make direct, personal contact with thousands of Thai orphans at a very limited cost. Thanks to all of our volunteers who organized the card-writing and passed the information along to friends, and all those who contributed financially or with time, this project was a phenomenal success.

Pierce Salguero is the Director of Tao Mountain, a non-profit organization dedicated to research and education in traditional Thai massage, herbal medicine, and Theravada Buddhism.