

## **Our Trip on Behalf of Yala Fund October 2007**

by

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Tory and I arrived in Colombo and were met by Hetti, our chauffeur guide for the trip. Hetti had outrun the tsunami in his jeep and saved the lives of his passengers – a devout Buddhist he felt he needed to ‘give something back’ to his people so he is the Country Co-ordinator for Yala Fund, and he speaks perfect English. We spent a couple of days travelling down to the south, via the Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage where we met the 3-legged elephant, a victim of a landmine, who has taught himself to walk; the blind elephant whose optic nerve had been severed by a bullet, and over 70 others, many of whom have broken tails; having loved elephants since childhood, I was thrilled when I fed the baby elephant with milk from baby bottles then went into the river to bathe them.



The elephants are walked through the village to the river to bathe

We then travelled through the old Ceylon tea plantations high up in the hills, and finally arrived in Tissa in the Yala region, where we met up with Kalu, a jeep driver who had also survived the wave and is now sponsored by Bev and John Thompson of Yala Fund. Kalu speaks almost no English but is crucial to the whole exercise as he is Yala Fund's Regional Co-Coordinator and searches out deserving cases. The whole journey is a story in itself but let's focus on the work we did in the Tissa area. Suffice to say that Sri Lanka is a beautiful

country full of humble people who never ask for anything and are touchingly grateful for the smallest thing. The country is still suffering badly from the effects of the tsunami and the consequent loss of the tourist business – the Tamil Tigers issue is also highly damaging and the Yala National Park, the huge safari park in the south east, has been closed for nearly 3 months due to terrorist activity. This has deprived the trackers and others involved in the tourist business of their income and they are unable to make ends meet. It is a tragic and sadly on-going disaster. The night before we flew home the terrorists hit the military airport, next to the main Colombo airport, with the loss of 28 lives. This is tragic news for the whole country and will only add to the on-going poverty.

Before we left the UK, we were briefed by Jon on existing projects to check up on:

### **Family In Negombo**

The first of these was the only really poor family living in Hetti's home village nr Negombo - a family with 4 girl children. The father originally came from a comfortably off family – his father died young, his mother went abroad to work and sent all her money home to relatives for her son; they stole the lot and are living on the proceeds to this day. She committed suicide on her return and left the boy penniless apart from owning this plot of land.

Early this year, when asked what they needed most, all they asked for was a new roof for the shack in which they lived but Yala Fund built them a house with electricity sponsored by a colleague of Jon Ashworth. As in all cases, the families are not just given charity but asked to contribute in some way – in this instance; the father is building the kitchen. The mother particularly is working very hard taking care of neighbours' cattle to feed the family – we decided to buy the 2 older children a bike each, cost approx £30 each, so that they can get to school every day. We will look later at perhaps buying them a couple of milking cows to produce an income.

### **Homeless Family**

This family had been found living on the street after their father had been jailed for being involved in selling illegal Arrak. There had been an option for Yala Fund to buy the father out of jail but it had been decided to let him pay for his crime but to take care of the children.

The Fund built them a cheap house, which was then washed away by floods leaving no choice but to build them a proper house. When the father was released from jail he had been given a bicycle to help him find work - both he and his wife now look daily for work as casual labourers and we felt that there were other more needy cases needing our support. However, we did deliver a month's basic food supplies to make sure the children were fed. Cost around £15.00.



### **Debarahela Primary School**

The school was near to closure when Jon Ashworth first came across it. Yala Fund decided to sponsor the school and set it on its feet. The buildings were renovated – Yala Fund bought the materials, the villagers re-built the school. You can see the photograph on the main Yala Fund website. The children were provided with uniforms and shoes but many of the children walked miles to get to school and fainted on arrival as they had not been given breakfast. Through sponsorship, they are now fed on arrival and the school and children are thriving – 15 new pupils will arrive in January.



The pupils of Debarahela School with 2 teachers, us and the caretaker

This is where I had already planned to plant my Uncle's memorial garden so we had a plot of land cleared by the caretaker and his family and we've planted fruit trees which will provide shade from the hot sun for the kids but also feed them... mango, papaya, banana, plum, orange, guava, passion fruit, papaya – clearing the land, buying the concrete posts and wire fencing, installation and labour came to the grand total of £110.66, the trees cost £4 and will start to produce fruit within a year. In return for maintaining the garden, we arranged for the caretaker's roof to be repaired at a cost of less than £200 to keep out the rain, for which he was so desperately grateful – quite heartbreaking that so little money can achieve so much. He was another victim – his throat had been cut by a neighbour who had tried to take his land away from him - but he survived and now has a new and responsible role to play.

We bought 10 tractors of sand at a cost of £26.66 for the school grounds as we were all sinking when it rained; paid some of their minor bills; spent hours talking and playing with the children and Tory taught them English songs. A very positive experience for all.



The land is cleared and the new garden started – dedicated to my much loved and missed Uncle Neil.

### **Rathna**

Jon had previously come across a young girl of 8 years old living in the Sith Sevana home for mentally handicapped children; after seeing her father cut her mother's throat the girl was so severely traumatised she had been unable to speak, with uncertain expectation of recovery; but when we arrived we were met by the extraordinary sight of her singing a song and dancing– an amazing step forward. She still does not speak but is expected eventually to be able to attend school.



Sitting next to her was another deeply traumatised child – her mother had died, her father re-married and the stepmother had kept her in a cage for years – she could neither stand nor speak. The children are extremely well-cared for and living in exceptionally good conditions in the home, run by an inspirational man called Mr Perera, who was once a Catholic Monk but fell in love and married - what better man could you ask for to run a home like this??

Yala Fund sponsors these 2 girls plus one other and also the boys at a cost of £5 per week per child which covers food, clothing and medical bills. We want to sponsor more of these children. At that moment what they most needed was human contact and so we danced and played with the children – quite a few tears when we left..

We then went to visit Rathna, the girl's 17-year-old brother. Yala Fund has set him up in a small shop in the front room of his house to enable him to make a living to support his other younger sister. What a huge responsibility for a 17-year-old boy. We had already decided that we would buy him a moped to enable him to travel to buy supplies from local farmers and wholesalers and make more of an income; we then suggested that if we extended the shop he could carry larger and more varying stock; perhaps also local people could grow or make products to sell – everybody could benefit from this.



He loved the idea and said he would build the extension himself if we bought him the



materials but we decided that he already had a huge burden on his young shoulders and so we would have it built for him. Rather than start searching for local unknown builders, we sent for Hetti's builder from Negombo, who arrived on the bus next day after an 8-hour journey. We had 3 projects for him to look at inc this one – within a couple of hours he had surveyed all 3 properties and we then sat at a rickety old table in an outhouse at the Temple, agreed the deal, wrote 3 post-dated cheques and off he went to order his materials and get his workmen down from

Negombo. They will live in this roadside shelter at the Temple while all the work is carried out. The cost of this shop project will be £355.

We then bought Rathna his moped at a cost of £218 and off he went so proudly – he tried so hard to communicate his thanks directly with us – we didn't need to speak the same language, his eyes said it all. It was all very emotional as he drove off proudly in his black helmet, which cost the princely sum of £1.

We visited several other existing cases buying various urgent requirements including:

1. 8 whiteboards and markers for another school supported by Yala Fund at a cost of £76.66
2. a keyboard and cassette radio to teach music at a primary school for £30
3. a month's supply of basic food stuffs for elderly people and homeless families particularly living in the fishing village of Kirinda, which was Yala Fund's first project – rice, dried milk, kerosene etc, etc at a cost of about £15 per family.



During the entire trip we were giving children coloured pens and pencils many donated by Alex Smith; footballs donated by Sara Curtis; and balloons, hair ornaments etc which we had taken with us.

Everywhere we went people just stopped and stared at us – fascinated by our clothes and jewellery – school children in the street would stop and wave – everybody everywhere was unfailingly friendly and always greeted us. It was if they had never before seen people like us. It transpires now that many of them hadn't.



The local grocery store where we purchased the food boxes.....not exactly Waitrose but full of sacks of dried foods.

Loading the food parcels into our jeep supervised by Hetti



and delivering to the old man at Kirinda fishing village:

### **Visit To Head Monk For The Southern Area**

We had been given an introduction to Dr Soratha, the overall Buddhist authority for the entire District – this is a VERY important man and it was considered quite an honour for us to meet him. We were briefed beforehand on how to behave! He has built an entire housing project within the Temple for homeless families, funded through one of the larger charities. The houses are very poor quality built at a cost of £500 each but do at least provide roofs over heads. The Temple has been provided with several handlooms in order to set up a business- but as there is no factory in which to house them, the looms are sitting in storage, another case of misguided charity. The project is too big for us at present – too much money is required. We visited a grandmother taking care of a 10 year old boy with cerebral palsy. He was lying on a blanket on the floor but was clearly being cared for. A charity had provided him with a wheelchair, which was of no use as he kept slipping through the open back. We know that Botox can be of help with cerebral palsy so will try to contact somebody in the business and look for possible sponsorship as this is a very common problem in Sri Lanka.

## New Cases

And then we went searching for new families needing help and we found many; in each case we held in-depth discussions with these families to ensure that the cases were genuine; to establish where property was involved that they held the rights to the land; to establish their most urgent requirements as we needed to help as many people as possible with the funds that you donated.

## Two Families Living In Paddy Fields

We found 2 families living on the edge of a paddy field in abject poverty. We accessed them by jeep then by foot when even the jeep couldn't get through. They were being allowed by the farmer to live in the shacks in return for looking after the fields but not allowed to improve their conditions in any way to ensure they could not claim any rights to the land – so lived daily with the threat of eviction. The father of the first family had long gone – there were 5 children but only 3 left at home including a very beautiful and clearly vulnerable 16 year old girl; the father of the 2<sup>nd</sup> family had “high blood pressure” so could not work.



When asked what they needed most they were reluctant to ask for anything at first – but clearly needed basic provisions and clothing. They eventually requested fabric, which could be made up without charge by a local dressmaker, rather than more expensive clothes. A



young very shy boy, who initially refused to ask for anything, eventually admitted that he needed school shoes as his were too small for him. Despite living in such dreadful conditions, they were all clean and well-kept. So we took them shopping and they chose fabric and shoes for both families – the 16 year old girl chose the first pair of shoes she saw that fitted her – brown and ugly, when we explained that she could have anything in the shop it was obvious she had never been given any choice in life before and was very shy but absolutely thrilled when she chose a very pretty pair. Tory gave

her a beautiful but inexpensive skirt that she had taken with her but never worn – the girl clearly treasured it and chose fabric to make a top to go with it.

Our jewellery fascinated all the women and girls who wanted to touch everything - it was a very memorable occasion for all. We also delivered a month's supply of basic foods e.g. rice, powdered milk etc to each family.

The 16 year old girl is beautiful and highly vulnerable in those circumstances. Hetti asked her if she would like to leave and be found a job and a place to live – having initially said she would, Kalu will speak to her again privately and, if she really does want to go, Hetti's wife will go down there to talk to her too.

The cost of buying the material to clothe 2 entire families was £25.11. The cost of the shoes and also school exercise books was £30.11.

We provided both families with a month's supply of basic foods stuffs and kerosene at less than £20 each.



### **The Murder Case Widow**

A young widow with children whose husband had been murdered, he had borrowed money from his brother-in-law to buy a jeep – when the tourist business declined he was unable to make the repayments. One night he was on his bike with his wife's brother, the brother-in-law drove at them, half killing them, finished them off by clubbing them to death – then dumped their bodies in the nearby tank, a man-made lake. Despite a witness, nothing could be proved and he was released from jail - the young widow of the wife's brother on the back of the bike then committed suicide. The young widow is now working on a road gang to provide food for the family, doesn't come much tougher than this.

Before he was murdered, the husband had laid the foundations for a house. The widow had been discovered by a Government charity that had added some of the exterior walls and another charity, which had put the roof on. Then both charities left. So the widow and children are still living in a shack next door to the unfinished house, as she couldn't possibly find the money to finish it. We decided to finish it although this was a big project by our standards!

It is costing just £1200 to completely finish this house, install floors, doors and windows, a patio to avoid the family sinking in the sand every time it rains; the work is being done as I am writing this.

Hetti's builder who had come down from in Negombo, mentioned previously, surveyed the property in minutes; the deeds to the land were in order as the other charities had checked them – we negotiated on the price and the builder went off to order his materials.

This will be the second project he will tackle after the school caretaker's roof. We now need funds to have the electricity and water installed and to buy her furniture so any help you can give would be so very much appreciated.

We are now trying to establish what else the widow can do to make a living – a road gang is a tough place to be.



The partially built house – but the widow lives in the adjoining shack

### **“Blossom”**

Now here's a remarkable and inspiring story. We found a tiny 78-year-old lady living on the edge of a tank in a shack – every time the water rises it comes up above her waist but she just has to wait it out. She has built her bed above the rising water line. She has nothing, is terribly deaf and is one of the feistiest, spirited people I have ever met. She clearly spends a lot of time keeping herself and her surroundings clean and tidy – her mosquito net had been washed and was outside drying in the sun. Her floor had clearly been swept not long before we arrived. When we asked what she needed most she kept replying 'anything you want to give me!'

She had worked in her youth for a British family who had wanted to take her back to the UK but her mother wouldn't let her go – so now she lives in terrible poverty dependent on handouts of food from local villagers. She has children but never sees them and they do nothing for her. As she says everything goes to the young people, the old people get nothing.



We first meet Blossom.....

Again we ordered a box of basic foodstuffs but also added some little luxuries like sweet



biscuits and jam, all for a cost of around £12. Then we hit on an idea – despite her situation she is after all a woman!! So we bought her a pink plastic bowl, a bunch of plastic flowers, flower ties for her hair and wrists; a new sarong; a chair – she didn't have one; a bag; a comb and mirror; English sweets we'd brought with us; a mug; drawing pad and crayons, and gave her a wind-up torch which Tory had brought with her. Hetti and Kalu just could not understand what we were doing – thought we were completely mad - she certainly understood and she

cried. Nobody had ever given her anything like this before. These bits cost less than my morning cup of cappuccino!

We went back later in the day with the kerosene we'd forgotten earlier and everything we had given her was proudly on display. We have also given Kalu money to take her for a check at the ENT hospital to see if a hearing aid would benefit her – if it would then we will buy it for her.

What an inspiration this woman is amongst all this deprivation and harsh living conditions.

We both took her to our hearts and have called her Blossom and our next mission is to raise enough money to build her a house, which Yala Fund will own but in which she can live out her final years.



Blossom in her new chair wearing her flowers in her hair and on her wrist and 'reading' the card Tory made for her

## **The Suicide Case Widow**

How to change a family's destiny with £40.00!

Another widow with children in a relatively good house with a beautiful garden, TV set, sewing machine etc. But her husband had become depressed when he was demoted to a menial job by his company, and had recently hung himself in their house – she and her 9 year old son opened the front door and found him there. They had moved the front door to avoid remembering the horror every time they entered the house. She is supposed to receive some sort of pension but it has just not happened so she has been making rag rugs from T-shirt fabric and selling them to neighbours - but now the factory that gave her the off-cuts from which she made the rugs has ceased trading and she has no other supply. She is clearly uneducated and still in deep trauma. Whilst trawling the area looking for another source of fabric supply we found a fabric shop manager who needed somebody to make white cotton under-slips for ladies and schoolgirls to wear. He would guarantee to purchase whatever she makes and thinks he could clear around 1,000 units per month - but she could also sell at local markets. So we purchased rolls of cotton cloth, elastic, sewing thread for about £35, a small cheap electric motor and needles for her sewing machine at a cost of £7.38 and she now has a business. We visited again the next morning and she was already churning out the goods and working out how to use every scrap of the fabric. These people waste nothing.



The start of a new business

## The Disabled Child Family

The 'child' is actually 27 years old and living in the worst circumstances we have come across in a shack built by local villagers. He has lived on his bed all his life and looks like a human crane fly – his feet face the opposite way round to normal, he uses all four limbs like arms although he did recognise that we were there and tried to communicate in his own way with us. His mother sleeps with him to take care of him while his 12 year old sister and 16-year-old brother share another room. The father is dead. This young boy of 16 has left school to try to get occasional work in the paddy fields and provide an income for the family. He also told us on our 1<sup>st</sup> visit that his mother had taken the disabled boy out on the street begging on one occasion – we suspected it is likely to have been more than that. All deeply distressing and I found this case particularly difficult. What they most needed was water in order to keep the disabled boy clean – they had the paperwork but had never been able to afford the installation. We have arranged installation for the grand sum of £42 and bought them the usual basic provisions. They will only be able to afford to use the water for keeping him clean, and will continue to go and fetch water for themselves from a neighbour. It will probably only cost around £1 a month to pay for the water so we will investigate how we could get this sponsored.

## The End Of The Trip

At this point, after re-visiting several of our projects, it was time for us to leave. We had spent long days on the projects, leaving our hotel at 8.30am every day and never getting back til 6.30pm at the earliest. The heat and the humidity were quite tiring, the hotel we stayed in was pretty grim, with smelly bathrooms and corridors infested with mosquitoes and insects– we were the only people there for most of the time. Despite showers 2 or 3 times a day, I have never been so dirty in my entire life and have to admit that we were both looking forward to a good soak in a hot bath. We had lived on 'rice and curry' – a large plate of rice with several small dishes of different curries and spices – throughout most of the trip – breakfast and dinner. It was truly delicious but time for a change. The bottle of gin we had bought on the plane was our evening lifesaver! And the peacock family 'volta' every morning in front of our rooms gave us a great start to the day.



On the way back we visited Shilpa Trust, a large children's charity. A colleague of Jon's has sponsored a competition to produce a drawing for his Christmas card – we collected the drawings, which are quite beautiful, and took up 50% of my suitcase. Yala Fund supports a young Muslim girl here called Pasena – her father was killed

in the tsunami, her mother lost her mind and disappeared. Pasena supports her 2 brothers – they live down in Kirinda and she had travelled miles to be here today. Shilpa Trust was holding its embroidery and dressmaking students' graduation open day and sale – the women are taught the skills then, when graduated, are provided with the materials to start a business. Yala Fund has already supplied 10 mopeds for the social workers involved in the Trust to enable them to travel around the area visiting the families. Tory bought 2 beautifully smocked girls' dresses for the grand sum of £2.50 for the 2.

On the way back up the coast to Galle we travelled through the tsunami area – how utterly heartbreaking to see the devastation and realise the huge loss of life. Hundreds of ruined houses, piles of debris where houses had once stood; what the charities had not recognised was that Boxing Day was a huge market day and hundreds of people had travelled to the coast from inland areas, never to return. These are the families that were not supported by the big charities and formed the basis for Yala Fund, which has now progressed to general cases of poverty, often an indirect result of the wave. Almost unbelievably, the fishermen from the area who were out at sea knew nothing of the wave until they returned later in the day to find their families and homes gone.

I went into this trip with an open mind about the outcome but there is no question that I have to go back early next year - and now we are looking at a very ambitious project. It will be very difficult but we are considering the possibility of buying some land and building houses for the homeless. This would include a unit divided into perhaps 4 self-contained units in which we could house people like Blossom until they die. The land and the buildings would belong to Yala Fund but the families and elderly would be given security for as long as they want to stay here. As with every case we visited, we have to avoid them becoming charity cases – all we want to do is give these people a start in life, the rest is up to them.

There is so much to tell – impossible to put it all into writing but more than happy if you want more information about anything. We also have an entire photo library too. Thank you again for all your donations – we could not have done any of this without all of you. I hope you might continue to help.

[www.suzytoyala.com](http://www.suzytoyala.com)

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