

Red Cross volunteer with local roots heads to Sri Lanka

By Angel R. Ackerman
Editor



This holiday season, Winnie Romeril's family may have noticed a vacancy around the house, maybe they were even a bit lonely.

With the second anniversary of the infamous tsunami that swept across Indonesia and surrounding countries, Romeril, who graduated from Moravian Academy in 1985, found herself volunteering in Sri Lanka for the Red Cross. She arrived in Colombo, the capital, in mid-November.

"It really picks up people's spirits to know that the rest of the world still cares about what is happening here. That goes for both tsunami survivors and relief workers," Romeril said.

And the holidays, well, that was tough.

"It's hard being away at Thanksgiving and for the end of the year holidays," she said. "The timing was difficult. We always look forward to winter in our upstate New York cabin and I love the change of seasons. Most people are jealous about me being in a hot climate when it's cold back home, but you always crave what you don't have."

Romeril's parents live in downtown Bethlehem. Her fam-



Winnie Romeril assists in pulling in the fishing nets made of coir—the hair of the coconut shell which is processed by villagers and woven into rope for a million and one uses.

ily moved to town when her father worked at Bethlehem Steel. Her parents may be to blame for her volunteering fervor.

"My parents taught me that volunteering is part of being a good citizen," she said. "Vote in every election and give generously of your time and money. For me, that means being a part of the American Red Cross."

The experience in Sri Lanka has taught her a lot of lessons.

"The strength of the people who survived the tsunami and their courage to persevere is humbling," Romeril said. "... It makes me believe that people joining together with a common vision really can change the world. This is why I'm part of the Red Cross."

The power of the Red Cross begins with individuals and their empathy.

"We all know people who have faced tragedy of some kind—a house fire, someone choking or whose heart stops suddenly, maybe someone from 9-1-1. So that empathy and human connection is there," Romeril said, "whether you think of your neighbor as someone around the corner or around the world."

The damage and the speed of recovery can be hard for Americans to comprehend.

"In America, we want a happy ending in the time it takes to order a pizza," Romeril said.

Despite huge strides toward recovery, Sri Lanka has other challenges to overcome. 35,000 people died in the tsunami. Half a million people had to flee their homes. Plus, there is physical conflict, as in shelling, that some people have fled.

Many tsunami survivors still live in transitional shelters of wood and tin. Some camps are



Photos courtesy Sri Lankan Red Cross Society.

Grandmother and granddaughter from Hegalle, Sri Lanka, with Winnie Romeril.

clean and safe, with flower gardens and community activities, Romeril said. Others need repairs. Others have suffered in the monsoons. Every day, Red Cross volunteers go into the camps to teach resilience skills and help people overcome emotional trauma.

The Red Cross and the International Organization for Migration has provided millions

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of dollars so that survivors can rebuild their homes and "put people in control of their own recovery," she said.

It may have been difficult to leave her family for such an exotic and traumatized place, but Romeril said the decision took her a week, after long discussions with her husband, David. She sees herself continuing her work to "improve the quality of life for people and the planet."

"I do that as a paramedic, a nonviolence trainer and through the Red Cross," she said.

Volunteering after a disaster can form strong bonds between people very quickly. Those relationships, between victim and helper, can be very intense, Romeril said.

"Maybe it's a bit addictive," she said, "but a good habit that I don't want to break."

Romeril and her husband live in Prattsburgh, N.Y. She's been a volunteer with the Red Cross since 1995.

She traces her history with the Red Cross to an incident in 1990, when she fell ill while volunteering with a "grassroots organization" in Mexico. The Red Cross provided her with fluids and medicine, despite the fact that she couldn't pay them.

The nurse who cared for her said Romeril would repay the Red Cross later.

For more information on the recovery efforts, visit www.redcross.org/tsunami. Donations can be made via the secure Web site as well.

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