

Harpist Takes the Blues to Tsunami-Hit Kids

by Jenn Young

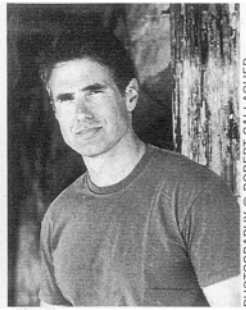
IN EARLY APRIL, harmonica player Gary Allegretto boarded a plane at Sydney International airport bound for Indonesia.

After a day's worth of connecting flights and a brush with a bomb scare in Bali, Allegretto arrived in Medan with his luggage and 1,000 harmonicas.

A city known for its lack of clean air and water, Medan is the capital city of Indonesian province North Sumatra. To the south lies Banda Aceh, the area hardest hit by the December 2004 tsunami that left 300,000 dead and numerous residents homeless, including children. Of the survivors, many were temporarily relocated to refugee camps and orphanages in Sumatra.

While outside organizations and agencies were quick to offer amenities such as food or blankets, Allegretto came bearing gifts of a different kind.

For one month Allegretto and Manly, Australia Chamber of Commerce member Natasha Phillips put into action the Harmonikids Tsunami Relief Effort. Allegretto traveled throughout North Sumatra, giving Hohner diatonic harmonicas to



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young tsunami survivors. In makeshift classrooms throughout the region he performed, taught children to play basic tunes, and tried to keep the focus positive.

"Music is the universal language. It makes people just as happy there as it does here, and it was the perfect vehicle for children," Allegretto said. "Here were these kids who had never heard this music before, and yet they were so musically involved."

Though he used a translator during the sessions, Allegretto opened each performance by speaking to the crowd in Indonesian. He would proceed into a 12-bar blues riff in G backed by an instrumental track from his iPod. Before the day was over, students learned to play "Shave and a Haircut," "Happy Birthday," and "Pontong Bebek Angsa," a traditional Indonesian song.

Allegretto conducted 10 Harmonikids sessions throughout Sumatra, with class sizes ranging from 25 to 200.

"Kids need to be kids in spite of all the destruction around them, so part of my mission was to make them happy and try to avoid getting into what happened," he said. "I wanted to get their self-confidence and self-esteem up."

In the United States, Allegretto's nonprofit Harmonikids program parallels the Indonesian version. Since founding the program in 2000, Allegretto has traveled to hospitals and clinics nationwide.