

REBUILDING THE SPIRITS OF TSUNAMI ORPHANS

Harmonikids Goes to Indonesia

The December 26th, 2004 tsunami disaster claimed the lives of nearly 300,000 people and left an estimated five million homeless, including 1.5 million children, most of who were orphaned. Due to its proximity to the epicenter, the province of North Sumatra suffered the most physical damage and human loss. It's hard to imagine the emotional trauma and agony that lingers in the aftermath. Personally, I worried about the children. There were horrible reports of sexual abuse and child slavery. Other reports involved misdirection of relief funds and supplies as well as general suspicion of outside help. Like most people at the time, I felt helplessly overwhelmed and confused about what I could do to make a difference in their shattered lives. As time passed, many of the children's needs were provided for by donations to relief organizations. But I continued to think about addressing the traumatic stress and emotional pain the children must be feeling after having their entire worlds swept away. The opportunity to help presented itself through interest in my non-profit organization, Harmonikids.

Harmonikids is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, which provides special needs children harmonicas and the joy of music through therapeutic, entertaining, and stress relieving instructional sessions. Through the portable and child-friendly harmonica, kids are given the lasting gift of music, which provides self-confidence, achievement, creativity and self-expression. Harmonikids has effectively reached thousands of kids with special needs widely ranging from learning disabilities to cerebral palsy to terminal cancer.

When I received the phone call inviting Harmonikids to North Sumatra, naturally I pondered the effectiveness of my organization to provide aid to the child victims of such a tremendous catastrophe. I concluded that regardless of the many complications, obstacles, and dangers, it would be the ultimate challenge and a unique opportunity to make a difference in their lives. I eagerly accepted.



The project was made possible through the fundraising, coordination efforts and assistance of Natasha Phillips representing the Manly Beach Chamber of Commerce and Council in Australia. Manly's sister city, Medan, is the capital city of North Sumatra and many of the child tsunami victims had been relocated to orphanages and refugee camps in the area. Mr. Bayu Fadhlán, Chairman of the Medan Chamber of Commerce (see footnote 3), as well as the organizations Mercy Indonesia and Warm Blankets provided critical assistance and support. Hohner, Inc. donated one third of the 1000 harmonicas.

Harmonikids' primary mission was to help replenish through the healing power of music some things that had been cruelly taken away from these children - their ability to laugh, play and express themselves.



Harmonikids Sessions

Many of the kids I taught had never seen or heard a harmonica before. Furthermore, most had never had any interaction whatsoever with a "Westerner" and would stare at me as if I were from another world. In fact, I was. I started each session introducing myself in Indonesian. Then I explained through a translator that I was there to give them new harmonicas and play songs with them. Often I noticed that the sessions would begin with many children looking somber, tentative, and even staring down in a depressed state. Others would fidget in excited anticipation. Upon telling them that I was there solely for them to have a good time, I would get spontaneous and unanimous applause as if relieved. Class facilities ranged from makeshift classrooms and refugee camps where the children sat politely cross legged on concrete floors on woven mats to dingy school rooms with beat up desks and benches. Rarely was there ventilation or fans and temperatures soared to a steamy 105 degrees Fahrenheit.

I began by performing an American Blues song, backed by a portable recording of a band that I brought along on my I Pod and speakers. Their response was that of curious delight. Though they had certainly never heard such music, they would tap their feet, clap their hands and snap their fingers in time. I would continue with a train song that I wrote which involves a harmonica energetically whistling and chugging to imitate a train. The lively song always brought eager smiles and bobbing heads in recognition of the sounds of a train. Universally, kids still love trains. Ironically, at one session of 200 kids, a nearby passing train actually rattled the building during my song, which brought along uncontrollable laughter and delight.

When I had sufficiently "warmed up my audience" I began teaching the songs. As an organization that provides musical therapy through the harmonica, the songs I choose to teach are very important. They must be positive, fun and simple songs that the children know by heart. As soon as I had landed in North Sumatra I started asking people what songs the children know and love. I was delighted to find out that everyone in Indonesia - child & adult - knew two songs that I teach special needs kids in the

States. The first song that I taught was the simple jingle "Shave and a Haircut - Two Bits". Indeed, they have an Indonesian version. It's a song that kids can learn with lightening speed and enthusiasm. This set up their confidence to play the next song "Happy Birthday", another well-known song in Indonesia. I would dedicate the song to whichever child had a birthday that day.

By far, the most popular song I taught was an Indonesian nursery song called "Pontong Bebek Angsa". Children and adults alike absolutely and unanimously adore it and the mere mention of it inspires people to sing the lyrics. At each session, the children would gleefully sing the song together with me. Upon learning to play it on the harmonica, children would smile and beam with pride. Interestingly enough, this irresistibly adorable song has a literal translation as follows: "Slaughter a little duck, cook it in a pot, ladies choose dancers, turn to the left, turn to the right, la la la la la la la la."

Playing By "Ear"

On a final note about the sessions, I would like to share the following story. Before passing out the harmonicas to further engage their interest, I told the kids that I was the only person in the world who could play the harmonica out of his ear. I explained that I must hold my nose tightly with my left hand to get pressure needed to blow out of my ear. Hidden in the palm of my left hand was a tiny harmonica. With my right hand, I held a regular harmonica against my ear. With much theatrical effort, I convincingly produced a note that indeed seemed to come out of my ear. I then slipped the tiny harmonica into my mouth and showed them that I had nothing in my hands.



Kids normally react with suspicious giggling and enthusiasm trying to figure out how I did it. In the end, I always share the magic by exposing the tiny harmonica in my mouth and playing a tune on it. Since their lessons are about to begin, I never want to lose their trust as a teacher. Moreover, I don't want them to blow out their eardrums trying to pull it off!

An interesting thing happened in Indonesia. Each time, when I do this illusion in my sessions, I first ask "who believes that I can play a harmonica out of my ear?" The kids almost always respond with great skepticism and amusement. Almost never does a hand go up. However, without exception when I asked the kids who had survived the disasters of Nias and Aceh, they all raised their hands believing that I could do this. Nobody doubted me. One boy, in fact, excitedly yelled out "I believe! I believe!" as if responding to an evangelical sermon. Even after I shared my secret, there were kids holding their harmonicas to their ears to try it. Not only did this blow the punch line of the illusion, it baffled me. As I turned to Mr. Bayu, I asked, "How could they believe such an impossible thing?" Bayu replied, "Gary, these kids believe in you. You showed up from far away to entertain them and gave them harmonicas. No one has ever done such a thing. The very fact that they have survived and are here today is a miracle! These are kids who are ready to believe in miracles."

Last Orphanage

The last orphanage we attended housed orphans from both Aceh and Nais Islands. Incredibly, some of them had witnessed and survived BOTH disasters. They had suffered the trauma of having dramatically lost everything except for their lives - twice. During the session a cloud of sadness lifted in the house and the air was filled with joy and laughter. In a touching moment before we left, the children insisted on saying a prayer for our health and safety. I was moved to tears that in the aftermath of the unfathomable turmoil they faced, they were concerned with OUR well being.

Often giving to special needs children brings gifts to your own life. Accordingly, the children I reached in North Sumatra have deeply inspired me with their courage and capacity for acceptance and recovery. They have reminded me to never take life for granted. In turn, I believe that my organization nurtured their spirits through the joyous gift of music. True, I had given them harmonicas, not food, shelter, or medical care. However, having received those necessities they desperately needed to return to being children again. Harmonikids gave the children an opportunity to recover some of the childhood joy and dreams that had been swept away from them and lost under the endless rubble of the tsunami disaster.



The joy of music is just under a child's nose!

www.harmonikids.org

A 501(c)(3) tax-deductible charitable organization