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Making a difference in southeast Asia

Angela Blackburn

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Oakville resident Sonia Ricotti may have been far from the devastation of the tsunami in southeast Asia two years ago Boxing Day, but this year she knows she's made a difference to those affected because she visited just before Christmas to finally help.

And perhaps the most valuable thing she left behind was not something she gave, really, but the memory of something she received and shared -- a few simple hugs.

"The devastation in Thailand remains vast and lives have been forever altered, however, hope and love prevail," said Ricotti.

The four-year local resident made a humanitarian mission with Airline Ambassadors International (AAI) to Thailand in late October to help the survivors of the tsunami that devastated the region two years ago Dec. 26.

Ricotti visited from Oct. 20 to Nov. 2 and has detailed her two-week trip on her blog at www.leadoutloud.blogspot.com.

"When the tsunami hit two years ago, I immediately wanted to go on a humanitarian trip to help the survivors. Unfortunately, all AAI trips were full and the other organizations wanted people with "disaster relief" experience (people who have dealt with death and destruction). Although I had been on several humanitarian trips in the past, I didn't have that type of experience. I felt frustrated and helpless, but I vowed to go there eventually. When I heard that AAI had a trip organized to go to Thailand in October, I signed up immediately," said Ricotti.

A defining moment for Ricotti was a visit to an orphanage that housed 18 children who lost their families when the tsunami hit. AAI threw a party in honour of the children.

"Towards the end of the evening, I noticed many of the children crying, hugging and consoling each other," said Ricotti.

"One of the people who worked there told me that the girl singing is singing a song in Thai



Photo Courtesy Sonia Ricotti

LOVE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE Oakville resident Sonia Ricotti is pictured during a lighter moment with two of the orphans she met at a party held for the orphans while visiting areas of southeast Asia that were struck by the tsunami two years ago.



Photo Courtesy Sonia Ricotti

DOCKED A photo of a boat that now sits inland after the tsunami.

about losing your mother. I began to cry, too. At that moment a little nine-year-old girl named Som, who lost both her mother and father in the tsunami, walked up to me, stopped, looked straight into my eyes, wiped the tears from my face and gave me a big hug. She was the one who had lost both her parents and yet she had the compassion and courage to console me," said Ricotti.

It's that kind of power that is embodied in Ricotti's own business, Lead Out Loud.

It is a leadership development company that develops transformational leaders; leaders that inspire and transform organizations, communities, and the world.



The company has three divisions focusing on three different areas of leadership; corporate leadership, benevolent leadership, and personal leadership.

At its core is the principle of the universal Law of Attraction. It's Ricotti's belief that we can make the world a better place. No matter what age, race, or religion a person is they can be an inspirational leader and make a difference in the lives of those they touch.

Ricotti calls it the Wave Movement -- a ripple effect dedicated to creating world peace and abundance. By focusing on the positive rather than the negative in all situations, the world can be transformed.

"The tsunami was what actually inspired me to create Lead Out Loud. The horrific disaster stirred up something deep inside me. I would have left my six-figure salary corporate career in an instant to go to southeast Asia to help out. It made me realize how making a difference is at the core of who I am," said Ricotti.

It was then that she said she began thinking of ways she could make a difference and make a living.

"I tried to dream up a career that would allow me utilize my leadership expertise and also make a difference. After a lot of thought and reflection, the vision of Lead Out Loud came about," said Ricotti.

Lead Out Loud was launched in January 2006 though she said it was "a work in progress" for a long time.

Ricotti is a speaker and trainer on leadership, personal growth, and making a difference. She has held numerous senior management positions and received several leadership awards. She has had work published and is a trained life coach and executive coach through The Coaches Training Institute (CTI).

Ricotti has been on several humanitarian trips with Airline Ambassadors International.

She first got involved with it three years ago when she saw a segment about the organization on The Today Show on NBC. "Right after seeing the segment on TV, I immediately went to their website. One month later, I was handing out humanitarian aid in poor villages in El Salvador," said Ricotti.

Most of Ricotti's humanitarian trips have been with Airline Ambassadors.

"I love the fact that they are a non-profit organization. All my trips with them have been incredibly rewarding as well as life-transforming for me," said Ricotti.

In March 2003, Ricotti was in El Salvador. She travelled to Nicaragua in February 2004 and again in November 2004.

Ricotti also made a trip to Guatemala in March 2006 in which she led a volunteer tour with GAP Adventures called Project Guatemala.

GAP Adventures specializes in adventure travel packages with various travel styles, one of them being "volunteer style" trips to various parts of the world.

"I have been participating in many humanitarian trips over the years because I love adventure, meeting new people, learning about new cultures, visiting new places, and more importantly, I love to make a difference," said Ricotti.

Ricotti visited the area of Thailand hardest hit by the tsunami and was in a group that included herself as well as three Americans and one Thai.

"Even almost two years later, the devastation and hardship still continues. It was an experience I can't even explain," said Ricotti, noting she still can't escape the feeling of being surrounded by the spirits of the many thousands of lost lives as she stood on the beach imagining what it would have been like when the tsunami washed ashore.

"'Eerie' is the only word I can use to describe what I was feeling. Each time I looked out to the sea, I couldn't help but imagine the water receding ...then the big wave rolling in ferociously five to six metres high towards shore ready to pummel everything in its path. I felt a pit in my stomach, nauseous, and a little dizzy just thinking about it...I visualized in my mind what it must have been like to have been there. I also began to think "what are the chances of it happening again - now?" A feeling I would hold with me for the rest of the trip," said Ricotti.

Her group visited Phuket, Thailand and on the way to the hotel saw an elephant who put his trunk right inside their van through the window.

Driving around Khao Lak, Ricotti said they stopped at an abandoned hotel where Ricotti said it looked like time had stood still.

"I looked in one of the rooms and I could tell it had been an office. Everything was destroyed. Papers and furniture strewn everywhere. Although it was almost two years later, it looked like it had just happened yesterday. Nothing had been touched," she said.

They also stopped at another hotel, once a five-star hotel.

"The devastation was horrible. Everything was left as it was. Many staff and tourists died there. It was eerie. As I walked through the grass to get to the beach, I noticed something very eerie. I noticed a blue flip-flop. I knew it had belonged to a victim of the tsunami. This entire place was eerily quiet, yet peaceful. It was completely abandoned. I felt nauseous," she said.

The group stayed in Khao Lak, where that famous video was shot of the tsunami rushing in and sweeping away a man on the beach.

"At night, as I lay in bed, I would hear the waves crashing. I wondered what it was like for the people who were in their rooms when the big wave hit. I imagined the water smashing the floor-to-ceiling windows and the water rising to the ceiling in a split second. Nowhere to escape. I couldn't get those thoughts out of mind for the rest of the trip," said Ricotti.

The visiting AAI group also toured a Burmese School. Many Burmese people have moved to

Thailand in search for a better life. Many live by the sea and many are in Thailand illegally.

Many of the unidentified bodies lost in the tsunami are believed to be Burmese people whose relatives are afraid to notify officials for fear of being deported or jailed.

Yet it was the visit to Thailand's Ban Pru Teaw Orphanage that left its mark on Ricotti.

It houses 18 orphans who lost their families when the tsunami hit. Originally the children were housed in a huge tent for 21 months. Last September, they moved into a new building built with funds donated from Japan. AAI donated money to build closets.

One of the children was a teenaged girl, a girl who lost 21 family members in the tsunami. A week before, they had finally identified her mother's body - almost two years after the tsunami hit.

"This was obviously a difficult and emotional time for her. I didn't know what to do. I decided to walk up to her and just gave her a big hug and held her in my arms. Neither of us were able to speak the other's language, yet we were able to communicate without speaking a word," said Ricotti.

"As we said our goodbyes to everyone, I specifically went to look for Som to say goodbye. When I found her, she gave me another big hug. We hugged each other for a long time. She then whispered in my ear (in English), 'I love you.' I replied, 'I love you too.'

"I knew from that moment, that I would eventually be back to that orphanage," said Ricotti.

Upon visiting Ban Nok Na School on Kho Khoa Island where school kits were distributed, Ricotti said she saw more fish than she'd ever seen.

She also saw the occasional huge boat right in the middle of nowhere -- right in the middle of the village.

"The ocean was nowhere to be seen, yet this boat is there. Many boats were thrown inland by the tsunami -- we were around 1 km away from the ocean," she said.

At the Duang Prateep Foundation Ricotti's group met with Prateep Ungsongtham Hata, the founder of the foundation. Its founder is one of the most well known and respected humanitarians in Thailand.

"It was an honour to spend time with her," said Ricotti.

-- Angela Blackburn can be reached at angela@oakvillebeaver.com.