



“Maybe tomorrow”:

WSU graduate student Steve Overfelt learns disaster relief skills in Sri Lanka

By Carol Price Spurling

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Last winter, just as political science student Steve Overfelt finished his Master’s degree coursework and should have started writing his thesis, he decided to put it off.

His adviser, Dr. Martha Cottam, encouraged his procrastination.

Is this evidence of deteriorating academic standards at Washington State University? Hardly. The tsunami that devastated coastal communities in Southeast Asia on December 26, 2004, changed many peoples’ plans, including Overfelt’s.

“I’d spent Thanksgiving in Indonesia doing research for my thesis on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), so I really wanted to go back to help,” Overfelt said. “But nobody wanted my physical labor, only the cash in my pocket. After a while, getting told ‘no’ became normal.”

Determined to be of use, Overfelt, along with fellow political science graduate students Joe Huseby and Paul Anderson, formed their own non-profit organization called Tsunami Relief Boats. They applied for a grant (still pending) and raised several thousand dollars, enough to send Steve Overfelt to Sri Lanka for four months, beginning in May. The original intention was to replace lost fishing boats for coastal fishermen.

“We found that you can’t just walk in there and give someone a boat,” Overfelt said. “The most important thing we’ve learned is to not come in with your own agenda, but to work with the locals.”

Overfelt cooperated first with an established Sri Lankan NGO called Sarvodaya, and finally, with Project Galle, a trust established by British residents of the Galle district of Sri Lanka. (www.projectgalle2005.com)

“They have done great work,” Overfelt said. “In the beginning it was food packs, and health packs, and tents. Then it was getting the tent camp people into temporary housing. They have meticulous records of who lives where, and the conditions and needs in the camps.”

Overfelt helped teach English, build housing, fill plastic bags with a corn/soy mix for distribution, and attended lots of meetings. He found his niche as a Liaison Officer with Project Galle.

“My job was to connect the dots, to move information from place to place. For instance, the reconnaissance teams brought back information that tents were flooding when it rains, so drainage ditches needed to be dug. I was responsible for calling the appropriate individuals to arrange it,” Overfelt said. “There were multiple issues but no follow up with solutions – so this sped up the process and made peoples’ lives easier.”

Progress is slow, Overfelt said, but he copes, along with the “patient” Sri Lankans.

“I have come to find that here, and perhaps in this line of work in general, you must be able to find victories in the smallest details,” he said. “Sometimes the only thing I can say I accomplished one day is that I learned a better way to get a water tank into a camp. It didn’t get the tank there, yet. But maybe tomorrow.”

Dr. Cottam, C.O. Johnson Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science, is very proud of her advisees, despite the temporary delay in Overfelt’s academic progress.

“The initiative, energy, and belief in public service that Steve, Joe, and Paul demonstrated shows the exceptional quality of our graduate students – and that theoretical concepts learned in class rooms at WSU can indeed be effectively translated into public policy and public service globally,” Cottam said.

“Steve has gained a completely different perspective on relief work, including a full recognition of the importance of involving the local community in the process of helping them recover from disaster. He developed skills in the realm of



transitioning people from tents, to temporary housing, to permanent housing, all of which will be necessary in the Gulf region after Katrina. Not many Americans have this kind of experience with the long term consequences of such enormous disasters.”

As the one-year anniversary of the tsunami approaches, and people in our own country begin the process of recovering from Hurricane Katrina, Overfelt recommends that other students follow their hearts if they are led into the “uncharted territory” of disaster relief.

“The desire to do this kind of work must come from within,” Overfelt said. “Just because you may not know anyone who has done what you are thinking about, doesn’t make it a strange idea. It just means you will learn that much more.”

Overfelt, from Moscow, Idaho, came home in early September to visit with his children and check in with Dr. Cottam. He returned to Galle in late September for another three months of volunteer work.

While the needs are still “huge,” and rubble from the tsunami damage still sits, awaiting cleanup, Overfelt loves his work, and the Sri Lankans who have befriended him.

“What marvels me continually is their lack of defeatism. They smile more often than not. They treat a stranger as if he were a relative. They make it easy for me to want to help them.”

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