Helping children with disabilities

At our pool in Poonochimunai in Batticaloa, we are helping the children from MENCAFEP (an organisation helping children with disabilities) gain confidence with water.

SwimLanka are not new to helping children with disabilities. After the 2004 tsunami we contacted the Sambodhi children’s home in Galle who offer care of children with mental and physical disabilities. We then started to run confidence with water classes for the children and youths of the home which lost nearly 50 children in the tsunami.

When we were contacted by MENCAFEP, currently running in Batticaloa, we were more than enthusiastic to arrange classes for the children.

MENCAFEP offer ‘non-institutionalised care for special needs/intellectually challenged children and young people, through caring for them in their own communities and for them to stay and live with their families’

The SwimLanka coaches are trained in teaching children with disabilities, along with the added support from MENCAFEP staff present during classes.

Children helped by the organization come to the Poonochimunai pool daily to attend their confidence with water classes; the first group graduating in April.

“In all wars and disasters it is the disabled child that is the first to die; it is the disabled child that is the first to get disease and infection; it is the disabled child that is the last to get resources when they are handed out. “ - MENCAFEP

With organisations such as MENCAFEP recognising the importance of water related games and skills, we were happy to share experiences to give all children in Batticaloa and Ampara the attention and support they deserve.

For more information on MENCAFEP, please consult their website:

http://www.mencafepsrilanka.com/

Some of the children supported by SwimLanka and MENCAFEP

SwimLanka classes taking place in Poonochimunai

SwimLanka is currently funded until March 2010 - if you would like more details or see how you could help us reach more children in Sri Lanka, please contact us at: swimlankaproject@gmail.com
TDH starts a pilot component of projecting movies related to the ocean in the communities targeted by our project, as a counseling tool to overcome fears related to the sea.

Noticing that four years after the Tsunami, most children and youth along the coastal belts are still experiencing fears, insecurity, anxiety, and developed, together with their communities, a negative attitude & perception towards the sea, we wished to organize counseling sessions on these fears.

We chose the tool of cinema in the evenings during dark hours, the setting of the beach, and we chose Finding Nemo.

We chose cinema because films provide a way to reach many people at once, overcoming literacy boundaries, bringing forth information where it is needed and inspiring hope where it is lacking.

Cinema, a movie night, also represents an instant in time, out of routine life, away from the day-to-day problems, and a moment and place of gathering of all in the community, parents and children, sisters and brothers, youth and elderly... “Sharing a positive experience all together, contributing to a sense of community”.

We chose Finding Nemo, animation family-oriented movie on ocean life as an entry point to lead group discussions on the themes of the sea and the beach, and to start educational and research activities with groups of children on these themes.

Finding Nemo not only reveals life in the ocean, but also helps to remember some lessons of life: One of the key messages of the movie is “not to allow our lives to be ruled by fear.”

In terms of organization, it took us a letter to the ministry of defense to obtain permission to organize it in a public place, a smile to an officer to explain that we do not need any security forces to ensure our safety and a good atmosphere.... Then our van, with Finding Nemo poster and a loud-speaker to announce the movie night, some posters glued on trees and gathering places, a message through the temple or the mosque.... A generator, a laptop, a projector, loudspeakers and an operator to make it work, a screen or a white sheet hung between two trees, plastic sheeting and mats to sit on, and the cooperation of the mothers of the village to prepare some popcorn!!!

We projected Finding Nemo already in Kallady, Thuruchenthooor, in Kaluwankerny and in Kalkuda. We’ve reached so far already more than a 1,000 people, with each time a big cheer for the movie to start, followed by an intense silence and focused faces absorbed by the adventures of Nemo and his father Marlin.

Laurence Souloumiac
TDH Project Coordinator

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Tales from the Batticaloa movie night

"About 200 people came to Kalady on the 27th of March, Thuruchenthoor, 600 people in Kaluwankerny on the 16th of April, 500 people in Kalkudah on the 18th of April, and 700 people in Palaiyadithona on the 24th of April!

Rumor is spreading around the village; there is a movie night tonight! It gets confirmed by the Tdh van, circling the streets of the village, announcing through loudspeakers, posters are hanging on trees, and even the temple has confirmed it!"

It is 5.30 PM, the official time for the start… First the most curious are coming, the children who impatiently await the movie to start, and are watching us installing the laptop, the screen, the sound system, the projector and the generator. It’s still light time, so our volunteers organize games to play with the children, a good opportunity for their parents, who are slowly arriving to the movie gathering on the beach to see the daily activities we organize with their children. Some parents arrived very well prepared, with plastic chairs, mats and lunch packs for the whole family! Youth arrive also, on motorbikes or on push bikes, hanging around the place, sitting safely on their saddle, curious about what is about to happen!

It’s 6.30 now, in about 15 minutes, it will be total dark so we will be able to project the movie. The screen has been fixed, sound has been tested, and we’re all set! We organize the big group to split in two. Sentences are displayed on the screen relating to the movie and our project. For example: “Parents don’t like their children to play on the beach”. Agree? Disagree? Everyone is encouraged to give their views.

We announce the start of the movie; the public cheers and claps.

6.45, the movie starts, and with it, a big silence sets in, as well as very focused faces on the movie.

Tdh team is getting crossed faces of children when trying to take pictures of the event, the flash of the camera is obviously disturbing them from watching the movie.

In the meanwhile, a group of mothers are chatting, gathered in the kitchen of one of our volunteers’ house, preparing popcorn for the movie night.

As the movie ends, it’s time for feedback of the public and music for all to dance to celebrate being united around the event, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, old and young, here on the beach. The small ones are already asleep and being brought back home.

Next date planned is the 30th of April in Puthukudiyiruppu.”

Tharshan Arulanantham
TDH - Batticaloa
Project Manager

As much as bringing a movie night to communities in the East is a fun night out, there are hugely important undertones to the event.

Gathering communities together to talk about fears and expectations of living next to the ocean after the 2004 tsunami was tackled by very few NGO’s after the disaster.

Fear exists in the minds of every person that survived the tsunami, the children partaking in SwimLanka classes, their parents and even our coaches and project managers.

By using a simple, yet effective tool such as ‘Finding Nemo’, we hope to start to help communities come to realise that the tsunami is not something to continually live in fear of, but rather to recognize the importance of swimming, as a life skill, a source of cultural integration and that beaches are a safe and natural playground for all.

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