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'Leap of faith' sends doctor to help tsunami victims

Doctor answers plea for tsunami aid

BY MOLLY KNIGHT
SUN STAFF

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The travel confirmation arrived by e-mail to Dr. Jamer Chamberlain in early January, one week after the devastating tsunami struck South Asia.

"Fly to Hyderabad."

The message - sent by a contact of Chamberlain's in India - said nothing more. But for the Anne Arundel County physician, it was enough.

"Like so many people, I'd been sitting there watching the tsunami victims on television and wondering what I could do," said Chamberlain, a family doctor who practices in Arnold and Stevensville. "Then it hit me that I had to go."

On Jan. 11, armed only with the e-mail confirmation, the name of a contact at the airport in Hyderabad and two suitcases - a large one filled with medicine and a small one filled with clothes - Chamberlain left his wife and three daughters for a two-week stay in a remote area of India hit by the tsunami.

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"It was a leap of faith," said Chamberlain, 46, of Arnold. "I went with a great deal of uncertainty."

Chamberlain had the support of the staff at his employer, Maryland Primary Care Physicians, who paid for his plane ticket and collected donations for his trip.

"We immediately liked the idea," said Donald Buntz, CEO of the medical group. "Not only because we're aware of Jamer's capability, but also because it was a more direct way to give relief than donating to a larger group."

Although Chamberlain didn't know what to expect in post-tsunami India, he knew plenty about the country itself. After graduation from Western Maryland (now McDaniel) College in 1980, he spent a year in India helping Jesuit doctors treat lepers, an experience that inspired him to attend medical school at the University of Maryland and develop a lifelong connection to India.

"I always vowed to go back," Chamberlain said.

His return trip took three flights and 30 hours, culminating in an overnight bus ride with a team of nurses and doctors to Nagapattinam - a town just north of Sri Lanka.

There, along with three nurses, a pharmacist, a counselor and a driver from the Catholic Health Association of India, an aid group based in Hyderabad, Chamberlain hit the road in a van filled with medicine.

For the next two weeks, the team traveled the bumpy rural roads of India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, which lost more than 13,000 people in the tragedy. Every morning - under the shade of trees or next to a temple - they set up an open-air doctor's office near a village and waited. "The patients just kept coming," Chamberlain said.

Working 11 hours straight in the hot climate, the team treated about 100 patients a day. About half had been directly affected by the tsunami and suffered from infected wounds. Others had lost their homes and caught intestinal or respiratory diseases sleeping in unsanitary shelters.

Chamberlain said he was stunned by how little help the Indian government provided. "The system there is a shambles," he said. "There are certain people - of lower castes - who they just won't treat."

For some patients, Chamberlain said treatment was as simple as placing a hand on a shoulder and a stethoscope on the chest.

"Oftentimes, that good will was enough," he said. "It gave them the sense that someone cared about them."

Weeks after the wave struck, signs of its destructive force were everywhere, Chamberlain said. He treated patients who had lost several family members. He passed women sitting in what remained of their homes, rocking and wailing. One day, he said, it was rumored that another deadly wave was approaching, which sent the frightened villagers onto their rooftops, staring out to sea.

Despite the suffering he witnessed, Chamberlain said, his trip was life-affirming.

"It was incredibly sad to hear the stories and see the broken people," Chamberlain said. "But the children were still playing in the streets and laughing. People there have a real sense of community - and that has been their salvation."

In addition, Chamberlain said, the uncomplicated life people in rural India - even a population still reeling from tragedy - gave him a sense of peace.

"Having had the opportunity to live among nuns in this simple life without cell phones, radio or TV made me realize that here we live this frenzied race against the clock," Chamberlain said. "I realize that all the things we have here come with a price - an unharmonious life that doesn't always make us happy."

Of all the devastation Chamberlain witnessed, he said the starving faces of people in Poovanthoppu - whose salt farms along the Bay of Bengal were wiped out - haunted him the most. After his return, Chamberlain began drafting a proposal to aid the village, where 106 families have no electricity or clean water, and suffer from anemia, malnourishment, cataracts and infectious diseases.

Early this month, he and his wife met with neighbors who are helping them to raise \$400,000 for a three-year aid project, spearheaded by the Catholic Health Association of India.

When asked if he plans to return to India, Chamberlain doesn't hesitate.

"Definitely," he said. "My dream is to go back to Poovanthoppu with a bunch of people from the neighborhood and build huts. It is the kind of village that - unless we help out - no one else will do anything for."

For more information, visit www.saltstreetfoundation.org, or send e-mail to info@saltstreetfoundation.org.

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