

# Family's tsunami mission

DIBARTOK

WHEN the Cunningham family of Mosman sought a "healing" holiday in Sri Lanka, they did not envisage what a life-changing experience it would be.

Laura and Bruce and their daughter Pip arrived in Colombo on Boxing Day, shortly after the devastating tsunami hit.

The family had lost their daughter Christie to cancer at 16 two years previously and this was to be a spiritual journey.

They were to meet a Sri Lankan friend who had organised a holiday on the east coast.

On the stopover in Singapore, the family saw Indonesians clustered around the television.

"There were reports of an earthquake in Sumatra but details were sketchy and later on the plane's in-flight screen there was a small announcement about a tsunami but, as no one on board mentioned it, we thought it mustn't be that serious," Mrs Cunningham said.

When they landed in Colombo there was a three-hour wait for a taxi and tourist booths were unmanned.

Their hotel was not answering the phone so they found a guest house in Negombo, one hour north of Colombo. Going to bed at 3am, they did not find out about the extent of the devastation until later that morning.

From then on the holiday became a mission, with the Cunninghams jumping to the aid of the Red Cross. But they went beyond mere back-up help, using

 **at a glance**  
helping hand

- **FUNDRAISER:** Garage sale.
- **WHERE:** Mosman High School.
- **WHEN:** May 21, 9am-1pm.

their own money to buy essential items. "In supermarkets you could see other tourists using their credit cards to buy food and other items for people," she said.

Their efforts were centred on the east coast village of Vaharai, which lost most of its housing. They counselled, bought necessities and saw them distributed.

The family stayed until January 15, despite Mrs Cunningham suffering malaria and dengue fever. Back in Australia, they still cannot turn their backs on people desperate for help.

"It will take 10 years to rebuild some of these places," Mrs Cunningham said.

"They need practical things so they can make a living, such as fishing nets and hoses."

Mrs Cunningham is acting as a direct conduit to the people of Vaharai.

"People fear that not all money going to aid agencies is getting through," she said.

Mosman High School, where Mrs Cunningham works in administration, has been supportive, backing a garage sale on May 21. Proceeds will go into a school account to directly help her mission.



Kim de Haan, Alon Arbiv, Claire Chaikin-Bryan and Laura Cunningham start preparing for the garage sale.

## When it comes to ongoing support, only a handful care

ONLY a few Mosman residents were interested in organising ongoing aid to tsunami-rocked Thailand - much to the shock of mayor Shirley Jenkins.

Cr Jenkins told last week's council meeting that she was "amazed by the attitude" of the community, which had not shown much interest in formulating an

ongoing Mosman-based relief effort. In February and March the council organised two "community conversations" to gauge interest in residents working with the council to establish a relationship with a small Thai village.

A total of 12 people attended the meetings, which endorsed ongoing support. But it was decided

more people were needed for the effort to be viable. In her report to the council, community development director Kay Clarke said the attendees were asked to talk to 10 Mosman residents to get their feedback.

Only two of the attendees subsequently contacted the council - one supporting the council organ-

ising aid, the other saying people should "do their own thing".

"Given the small response, it would be difficult to recommend any further action," Mrs Clarke said in her report.

Mike Sprange, a Mosman businessman who helped organise the "tsunami Sunday" sports event in January that raised

\$120,000, said he felt a large fundraiser was best driven by an individual. "This is no criticism of the council but I think people can relate better to someone being in charge, running a campaign," he said. "Tsunami Sunday worked because it focused people's attention straight away into doing something positive."

**Harvey Norman**

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