

The three lawyers who cared

Orphans of the Boxing Day tsunami still need help, writes **Liza Power**.

PRIYANGA Hettiarachi was 20 kilometres south of Colombo when the tsunami hit the southwest coast of Sri Lanka last December. Initially, he wondered what had happened — he found pools of water by the roadside, but nothing significant. It wasn't until later, when the first television reports began to screen, that he realised.

Hettiarachi, with friends Nick Perkins and Chris Carrodus, all lawyers in Melbourne, devoted the remainder of their holiday to helping with the relief effort, buying blankets, medicine and food, loading and unloading trucks and delivering supplies to refugee camps. After returning to Australia in February, the three were still thinking of ways to contribute.

"We wanted to find a way to ensure assistance was maintained after the media attention had shifted on to another cause," says Hettiarachi. "So we decided to design a project and keep it small and manageable, allowing us to keep an eye on what's happening on the ground."

The group also wanted to launch a charity, donors to which can track how their money is spent. "Donors should be able to ask what exactly their \$5 is doing," Hettiarachi says.

"We chose a children's charity because we each look to our families to give us strength and a feeling of belonging, and it was hard for us to imagine what life might be like for a child without that support," he says.

"We chose to focus our efforts in Batticaloa (a small town in eastern Sri Lanka) because it's an



An orphan of the tsunami.

area that's been devastated by 20 years of civil war and the effects of December's tsunami came on top of that."

Hettiarachi, who grew up Sri Lanka, but emigrated to Australia in 1983 after riots in Colombo, returned to Sri Lanka in April to meet representatives from St John's Church in Batticaloa. The church runs five shelters and provides a home for 500 orphans.

The Jasmine Foundation wants to raise enough money to buy 35 bunk beds, 145 mattresses and other goods for the children.

In the longer-term, Hettiarachi hopes the Jasmine Foundation might take its small-scale model to projects involving indigenous Australians and refugees. For now, he's happy to focus on Sri Lanka.

"My family left Sri Lanka after our home was burnt down and because of the difficulties surrounding the civil war. You can look at an event like that and start hating the place, but sometimes nothing can shake your passion.

"Nothing can shake my passion for Sri Lanka," Hettiarachi says.

JASMINE FOUNDATION

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