

DEATH WALKS BEHIND THEM

The rural coastal belt, of Varkari in Batticaloa District, in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka is one of the most beautiful places on this planet and one of the poorest areas in Sri Lanka. Underneath lush coconut trees are small villages, kilometre after kilometre of white sandy beaches and opal blue sea; its inhabitants rely on subsistence fishing. In the past 25 years, it has been devastated by the civil war, the 2004 Tsunami and now a natural emergency like the present time floods has afflicted this part of the Indian Ocean Island. If you look at it on a map of Sri Lanka, it looks like a tear drop at the end of the Indian sub-continent.

Many tears have been spilt in this part of the world, where the look of paradise hides the face of hell. Many people, who live and survive here, have often believed that death walks behind them.

In early 2007, just after the North East monsoon had subsided the Sri Lankan army decided to mount an offensive to clear this coastal area of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE had been in control of this area for over six years; however, during the civil war this part of Sri Lanka has changed hands on at least 6 occasions. Causing mass displacement, infrastructure destroyed and families separated.

As the army moved from village to village, shooting at anything that moved (the LTTE had left the area the night before). They came across the small hamlet of *Vellapuram, where two sisters, *Manda and *Dapnum lived with their mother, father, elder sister, brother and extended family, Dapnum had been diagnosed soon after birth with Down's syndrome.

Manda and Dapnum remember that cloudy but warm afternoon in February that would change their lives forever. They were playing in the sand outside of their cadjun hut (a house made from coconut palms). Suddenly the shooting started, the children startled from their play, looked around them. People from the village were running, children crawling, running, adults running with children in their arms, children and adults crying. Dapnum started to cry as adults and children fell, all friends, as some inexplicable force hit them.

Vijaya heard her father shout she looked toward the beach, where he had been tending his fishing nets. He was running up the beach toward his children, he was hit several times and blood exploded from his body. Their mother ran screaming from the hut, scooped the two children up in her arms, and started to run with the rest of the village. As Manda looked over her mother's shoulder, she saw her father writhing on the beach. "A man in a uniform came over to him and shoots him in the head, my Dada stopped moving", Manda recalls, as tears run down her cheeks.

The horror did not stop. Manda and Dapnum's mother cried out and throw the children forward, as her body twisted and turned as the bullets tore into her body. The children lay face down in the sand; Manda turned her head to look at her younger sister. Dapnum's face was ashen and her eyes bulged, her left hand was bleeding profusely, but Manda remembers Dapnum tried to smile, that beautiful loving smile she always seemed to have. With pandemonium going on all around them, villagers running and screaming. The army shooting, shouting and running trying to round up the village. Manda crawling managed to drag Dapnum over to the body of their mother. She managed to place Dapnum under the arm of her mother, told Dapnum that they were going to play a game and Dapnum had to be very good and very quiet. Manda covered her sister with the blood of their mother and told her to close her eyes

and lie completely still until she called her. Manda then covered herself in blood from her dead mother and laid across her mother's feet, completely still with eyes closed, as the black flies started their ritual procession, to feed of the red/black drying liquid.

Manda remembers hearing the soldiers' stamping around and shouting, as they "played dead". As the sun went down the shouting, screams and stamping faded away...

The next morning the children were found by neighbouring villages huddled together weeping in their ransacked hut.

They were taken to the *Katapuram Refugee Camp, where their mother's sister, their aunty took them under her wing. Dapnum was 3+ years and Manda was 11 years, they were in a state of shock and had no idea where the rest of their extended family had been dispersed too.

The children's older brother, sister and grandmother were found and the children had contact with them again.

In January 2009 MENCAFEP came across Manda and Dapnum and their story. From the end of the fighting in the Eastern Province, especially in the *Puram's area in the Batticaloa District. MENCAFEP started to develop its work in this area. By moving back with the displaced community after the fighting has subsided has enabled MENCAFEP to set up what can only be described as a Social Service Department for children, young people with mental, physical disabilities, children with learning difficulties and special needs, along with their families. Along-side this MENCAFEP has introduced a totally new concept to the Sri Lankan Education and play system; that able and disabled children can be educated together, can play together and can live together with dignity.

Manda, Dapnum and their family are one of the finest examples of living together with dignity that MENCAFEP in its history has come across. The horrors they have had to endure at such an early age have no doubt traumatised them, but with the love of their extended family and now the MENCAFEP project, the healing process has started for these two little girls.

MENCAFEP has a strong belief that to change attitudes towards disability, you need the community on your side, the full community on your side!

Dapnum was one of the first students to start attending the *Kathapuram Centre; she started in the pre-school and is now moved into primary 1. She is coming on leaps and bounds, with her education and her social skills. Her hand that was hit by a bullet when her mother was killed has healed, although the MENCAFEP mobile clinics still check it. Her aunty says that since she has been attending the centre her nightmares which she got every other night seem to have stopped.

Manda attends the Government School that the MENCAFEP Centre is part of; she is studying to take her O/Levels. The Church has helped with Manda's education, books, equipment food and health. She is still a withdrawn girl, but slowly with the help of her sister, who she is very protective towards, she is coming out of her shell.

Manda along with Dapnum attend the inclusive Play Activity in the afternoon that MENCAFEP have started to run along-side its centre work. Dapnum can make Manda smile and laugh, MENCAFEP is changing children's lives for the better. Manda still has her nightmares, but her aunty tells us they are not as frequent as they were. Dapnum, Manda and their family are only two of the 1,465 families that

MENCAFEP is trying to assist to make their lives better and hopefully move on from the tragedies of the past. The Leominster Methodist Church, with their donation this time, have not only helped in providing the health clinics we run, but have helped buy sports and play equipment for the Play Activity Programme in the afternoons. That not only benefits Manda and Dapnum who attend it, but also the other 1,465 families we are helping.

MENCAFEP has been placed in a unique position; for the first time in Sri Lanka (possibly South Asia?) able children and disabled children are being educated together, for the first time in Sri Lanka (possibly South Asia?) disabled children and able children are playing together! Making a sea change in the community, families with disabled children living in their communities with dignity.

Maybe the learning points from this story are that when natural and/or human disasters take place and communities return to their homes after such disasters. If organisations like MENCAFEP return with people to rebuild their lives, exceptional changes can be made to the lives of people that have suffered so much.

*Names changed to protect the children and the people in the places mentioned.

Chris Stubbs – October 2011