

# Sister Cities:

*From Phoenix, Arizona to Meulaboh, Indonesia*

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By Vicki Oei



## **The Call**

It was a great surprise when I received the invitation from the Food for the Hungry organization (FH) to join the team from Phoenix to go to Meulaboh, Aceh in Indonesia. It was March when the call came, which meant I did not have much time to make my decision. At first I was not sure it was such a good idea to leave on such short notice. I would have only about a month to get ready, but I knew in my spirit that this trip would be a great opportunity.

## **What Would I Do in Meulaboh?**

Meulaboh experienced profound devastation from the earthquake and tsunami on December 26, 2004. The city lost 40,000 of 120,000 residents and most of the infrastructure. In response to the tragedy, the City of Phoenix and FH partnered to adopt Meulaboh, with a ten year commitment to help the city and the people re-build. This trip was focused on teaching people new skills, both in education and baking. I was asked to assist and teach the "Bakers Group". My hope was that I could help with translation and develop relationships with the people in Meulaboh.

We had our Orientation a week before our departure date. I was totally at peace when we gathered for the first time at the FH office. John Frick, our team leader, had been to Meulaboh 3 times, including the trip that my daughter and son-in-law, Nicola and Thomas, went on in September. Phoenix Councilwoman Peggy Bilsten and Diane Hakala were in Meulaboh 12 days after the Tsunami hit Aceh. They returned to the ravaged area a year ago in May 2005. For the rest of us, it was our first trip to Aceh. It was the first time to see the devastation with our own eyes.

## **The Journey Begins**

The total travel time from Phoenix to Meulaboh, including lay-overs, was approximately 26 hours, with the longest flight from Los Angeles to Singapore (16 hours). Despite the length, the overall trip passed easily. We were able to rest, eat and take a shower in the lounge at the Singapore airport, helping us to arrive ready to hit the ground running in Indonesia.

The group flew from Medan to Meulaboh on two flights. Our mode of transportation was an 8 passenger MAF Cessna Caravan used as a float plane. MAF provides transportation all over the world for relief groups. Four pilots were assigned to the Tsunami Regions.



## First Impressions

The Meulaboh airport “terminal” is situated in a little shack, in very lush terrain. We were picked up and warmly welcomed by 2 FH staff members. Just as we were driving down the road, we passed the Camat Dadek (mayor) and his wife Eva, who stopped their vehicle right in the middle of the narrow road. Those of us who know him, including myself, got out of the car and exchanged hugs and greetings. I had met the Camat and his wife Eva when they visited Phoenix in January 2006.



They came to our city to thank the communities here and also to establish and build a relationship between our cities. They also visited other states which have done so much for the people of Meulaboh.

During our drive, we saw new houses being built, but we also saw those still living in tents 18 months after the disaster. They were smiling and seemingly grateful to be alive. Children and entire families were waving to us! Most of the homes are modestly sized around 500 square feet. The

Non Government Organizations (NGOs) have done amazing work in less than one and a half years. There are International NGOs as well as National NGOs throughout Meulaboh. Aceh had been closed to the outside world for so many years. Before the Tsunami, you would rarely see a “buhle” (fair-skinned foreigner). Now, the areas of Meulaboh, Calang, Banda Aceh and other cities are as diverse as the United Nations.

I have such great respect for the young people serving as relief workers in Meulaboh. Most are in their 20s and 30s. They are so committed and dedicated to work under such difficult conditions. They represent many different NGOs and come from all over the world, as well as throughout Indonesia. Many left their jobs and the big city to come and care enough to make a difference personally.

## The Devastation

Our first glimpse of the utter devastation Meulaboh experienced was a visit to the Peninsula at sunset. This piece of land was hit on two sides by the wave, leaving it virtually scraped clean of all the homes and structures. It really took our breath away to see such devastation on one hand, (the signs of where the water had left so much in ruins and rubble) and on the other hand, we witnessed the most beautiful sunset.



We also saw the mass grave yard where thousands of bodies were unidentified and buried. The number of people who lost their lives is a lot higher than the statistics indicated. The town of Meulaboh lost over 40,000 lives. One third of the population is gone and many areas remain destroyed and flooded.



We went to bed that night feeling how blessed we were, to be able to sleep in a modest hotel, with a small air conditioning unit that went on and off throughout the night, the lights in the room that flickered on and off and yellow water to take a bath. I was very grateful to have brought Agrisept (citrus seeds extract that kills bacteria, virus, fungus, etc.) with me and felt quite safe. That was our first day... .. Selamat Tidur! (Sleep well!)

### **The Next Day ... Sunday**

It was indeed a beautiful morning. My roommate Suzie and I went for an hour-long walk on the beach. It had rained most of the night and we had a chance to see everything close up. It was also an opportunity for me to share some of the Indonesian culture and customs with Suzie. After our walk we all got picked up by CiCi, our driver who took us to the FH offices for church service. After church we went to Mie Kocok, the staff's favorite noodle house. I was thinking of Okky because he would be visiting this place every day! They make many different kinds of noodle dishes and they were all so good. I can still taste it...Yum!

In the afternoon we picnicked on the beach with other NGOs, a fun weekly event for the staff in this unrelenting environment. Though none of us swam in the ocean, we enjoyed playing on the beach. The barbeque fish was delicious! We had a choice of 4 different kinds of fish, rice and hot sauce. The Camat and his wife and family also came. The waves are huge and I tried to imagine how big a Tsunami wave must have been. I shuddered and could not fathom what it must have been like.



All the fresh air, conversations, and walks on the beach made us tired! And just as we all felt ready to go back to the hotel to rest a bit, we were invited by the Camat to a Cultural Evening at 8 PM. It turned out that the evening was to honor Peggy Bilsten and the Phoenix team!! There were not only banners at this hall, but also on the street circles, and atop the buildings. All of this to welcome us! It was a dinner show to recognize Peggy for what she has

done for the people of Meulaboh. We had a full day and at the end of the night wished everyone Selamat Malam! (Good night!).

### **Our Work Begins**

We started each morning with a devotion and prayer. Afterwards, each of us went with our own teams to organize everything. Our team, the baking team, started off by testing the recipes in the guest house kitchen first.

The PKK women's group lead by Ibu Eva (Mrs. Eva) had received baking grants. The women are leaders from the different areas. They were given ovens and mixers. Our role was to give them an edge in the market place by teaching them new recipes that they can improvise with local ingredients. The recipes we taught were for biscotti, banana muffins and cinnamon rolls/bread.

It was very special for me to be able to communicate with the women in Indonesian. It did not take long for them to open up and share stories about their families and their tragedies. It is part of their healing process, but I was sad to hear their stories and at the same time glad that they had picked up the pieces and continued to live with hope. Some of them remembered Thomas and Nicola from their trauma counseling workshops for the PKK in September 2005.



We did 2 groups and 2 classes each. Everything was done on the floor on a plastic sheet. According to the local custom, we took our sandals or shoes off when entering a house or office, so everything was conducted in bare feet! Two of the FH staff, Evie and Chandra, helped translate each process step by step.

The biscotti, which were made with coconut and nuts, were delicious! So were the muffins and cinnamon rolls. Everyone seemed to enjoy the classes and they all wanted us to taste their baked goods!

### **The Impact**

One of the highlights for me was the visit with the people who had received grants from FH to rebuild their livelihood. We met Bustami, a 34 year old man who lost 28 members of his family, leaving only him and his 11 year old nephew. He had just opened a kiosk 4 months before the Tsunami hit and devastated everything. At first, he joined the FH Cash for Work program. Then he applied for a grant to reopen his kiosk. All beneficiaries go through a screening program to qualify. They have to do 10 days of community work and agree to start a savings program. Now Bustami not only has his Kiosk, but his nephew helps him after school. In addition, he drives a becak (public transportation) as a second income.



We also talked to a well known tailor and a carpenter and heard story after story of tragedy and survival. There is no doubt in my mind that each survivor is a miracle. Of course there are also some problems. Tragedies have a way of bringing out the best and the worst in man. There is greed, cheating and fighting to survive, and it is not uncommon for the staff to receive threats. Overall though, what we see is hearts being changed. Now they cannot help but see how many nations and people have come together to offer not just funds but also their labor of love.

When people give for relief causes, sometimes it is difficult to know the impact of our gifts. It was a special opportunity to see first hand how the lives of these survivors had changed because of the help of people who live so far away.

### **A Special Evening**

On the last night in Meulaboh, the Camat and his wife invited us to come to their home for dinner. It was a special time. I presented the Camat and Ibu Eva with a windbell made by Paolo Soleri especially in commemoration of the tsunami tragedy.

We stopped by the guest house to say our sad good byes as we were leaving for Medan the next morning at 6 AM. We developed a special bond with the staff in Meulaboh that will remain in our hearts forever.



### **The Journey Home**

On the way back we flew over an active and steaming volcano. This region is in the Ring of Fire so there is a lot of volcanic activity. The MAF had to make a medical evacuation stop for a missionary from the Obor Berkat Indonesia who broke a leg in a motorcycle accident. In Medan, we stayed in the Grand Angkasa Hotel for one night which felt like the lap of luxury! Hot water for a shower...what a treat! We had our de-briefing after dinner and got a well-deserved night rest.

Our long journey home began on Saturday April 29th from Medan to Los Angeles. Okky was already in Long Beach and came to pick me up at the airport.

I am so grateful and I thank God to have had the opportunity to be on this team. I felt blessed to have been able to be in Aceh and build relationships with people who are so committed to make a difference. I know that I have received a lot because I have learned so much, seen so much and experienced so much in such a short time.

Please continue to pray for the people in Aceh and for those who serve there. Thank you for your support and your prayers before and during my trip to Meulaboh.