



2004: Water sources were either destroyed or disrupted, causing tens of thousands of internally displaced people to live in harsh conditions. PHOTO: ERNEST GOH



Ms Juliah's first job at Meulaboh was to set up an office to coordinate Mercy Relief's activities, but she then became involved in various other tasks. PHOTO: MERCY RELIEF

Drawn to town's people and simple life



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DRIVEN BY CAUSE

"I also didn't want to come back till I felt the people could manage on their own."

Ms Juliah Bee Abdul Latiff (left), who has worked with three organisations in Meulaboh so far, each time looking for another project when one ended instead of going home.

By MELISSA SIM

THE tsunami changed millions of lives in the affected areas, but it also put some Singaporeans on some surprising new roads in life.

Take Ms Juliah Bee Abdul Latiff, who has spent the better part of 4½ years in the once-devastated Indonesian town of Meulaboh carrying out aid work.

A passion for field work took her to the area with Mercy Relief after the waves hit, but a love for the town and its people has kept her there.

"I think I have been back to Singapore for only four to five months in total since I started work there," says the 33-year-old Singaporean, who considers Indonesia her second home.

She has worked with three organisations in Meulaboh: Mercy Relief, World Toilet Organisation and Habitat for Humanity.

When a project ended, she would look for another rather than return home.

"I wanted more field experience," she says. "I also didn't want to come back till I felt the people could manage on their own."

She arrived in Meulaboh – her first relief mission – in January 2005, about three weeks after the tsunami.

"We were given just 48 hours to pack and go. We didn't even know how long we were going to be there," says Ms Juliah.

Her first job was to set up an office to coordinate Mercy Relief's activities, but she then became involved in everything from building homes and shelters to donating blankets and food.

But life was not easy in the first few weeks as she did not have a support network and communication lines were down.

"Sometimes we had to step out of our office and walk towards the sea just to get a signal," she says.

A simple process at first glance, but the ocean had a forbidding presence in the dreadful days after the tsunami. Most of the bodies had been cleared away but the air still reeked of rotting flesh and most people avoided the sea out of fear of more waves.

Within a year, most of the relief work had been completed and Ms Juliah was asked to return to Singapore. But she decided to stay on with Habitat for Humanity, which had an ongoing housing project.

"I felt I could learn something new, and put my finance background to good use," says Ms Juliah, who has a business degree specialising in human resource consulting from the Nanyang Technological University and a diploma in accounting and finance.

Her job was to monitor and evaluate the building of about 1,800 homes to "make sure they were physically there". She also had to go through purchasing and finance documents to ensure the paperwork was in order.

She would then interview families, assess their needs and assign homes.

Her work with the World Toilet Organisation involved running her own programme to teach villagers about sanitation and hygiene. She reached about 550 families in a year.

"The villagers kept seeing this same girl from Singapore. But it's good because they felt that Singapore didn't just forget about them," she says.

She certainly hasn't.

Ms Juliah speaks fondly of a family she grew particularly close to from her first days in Meulaboh. The family had lost one son and their homes were destroyed by the tsunami, but they picked themselves up and reopened their nasi padang business next to the Mercy Relief office.

"They even took care of me, and would send food to me when I was ill," she recalls.

Five years after the devastating tsunami, life for the Wahyu family has returned to normal.

Like the Wahyu family, the rest of the villagers have also picked up the pieces and moved on.

"The people are so enterprising; they work for NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as contractors or have set up cellphone businesses. They are really economically stable now."

Yet, much remains of their old ways and it is the simplicity and pace of life that have worked its magic on Ms Juliah.

"When you live the way they do, it's so hard to take that away. The simplicity is so nice," she says, with thoughts drifting to her hammock in front of her sea-facing room in Meulaboh.

This is why her future plans involve settling down in Meulaboh and starting her own NGO.

"I would teach people about hygiene, or set up an English school, or help out in disasters in other areas," she says.

"I feel motivated to give back to other parts of Indonesia."