

Alumni Profile: **Marvin Haasen (MBA '91)** by *Matthew Fox*

Six weeks after the tsunami devastated coastal areas in southeast Asia and east Africa, Matthew Fox spoke to Marvin Haasen for his perspective on recovery efforts in Thailand. Based in Bangkok since 1998, Marvin is principal and managing director of Asian acquisitions at Lend Lease Real Estate Investments.

Matthew Fox: Can you describe your reaction to first hearing about the tsunami?

Marvin Haasen: My wife and children and I were at my parents' home in London, Ontario on December 26th. My uncle phoned, because his daughter and her husband were in Thailand on vacation; he had just heard that an earthquake had struck and resulted in a tsunami, and was worried for their safety. I turned on CNN and saw the images from Phuket, and I was in total shock. At that point there were only 12,000 expected deaths in all of southern Asia [the figure is now approaching 250,000]. My wife and I became extremely worried for friends and colleagues in Thailand; we decided to cut our vacation short and return to see if we could assist.

MF: When did you begin to understand the scale of this disaster?

MH: Upon my return to Thailand, I got involved in relief efforts, traveling to some of the smaller villages, where I realized the full extent of the disaster. Some were totally destroyed, with only concrete shells remaining of what used to be homes, businesses and hotels. I've never witnessed anything so shocking. I went to Baan Nam Khem ['Homes by the Salt Water'], a village that had over 900 residents: six hundred were killed, and of the survivors, only five per cent have homes to live in, while the rest are in refugee camps. Most of their fishing vessels are destroyed (see photos, page 70). These people are left with nothing. What you mainly saw on CNN was the resort



Marvin Haasen

island of Phuket. What didn't get shown on TV were areas like Phang Nga province, north of Phuket Island – smaller fishing villages that were almost totally destroyed. I saw people sitting in open concrete structures, what was left of their homes. I got together with a group of expats, and we used our own vehicles to bring people food and water, delivering from community to community. We found ourselves giving money to villagers. Twenty-five dollars can buy food for a family for up to a month. You feel such a loss for these people.

MF: What are the long-term prospects for the survivors?

MH: While I think Phuket Island will recover over the next year once tourists begin to return, life will not return to normal in many of the smaller villages for some time. Some, like Baan Nam Khem, will take decades to recover. These people have lost everything – their family members, their homes and their livelihoods. As well, Thai people are very superstitious, so it may take months or years for some to return to their villages because they are fearful of the next tsunami. I recently visited Koh Lak, a resort area north of Phuket Island; when I stood in the midst of the ruins and looked around, I could see the incredible force and destruction the waves had – they destroyed buildings up to




three kilometres inland. It literally brings tears to your eyes. I've never seen anything like it, and hope to never again.

MF: How was your organization affected?

MH: The division that I run invests in real estate throughout Asia, including Thailand. From a business perspective, we were fortunate in that our investments weren't affected. However, our construction division was completing a 200-room hotel in Koh Lak, and we had

250 construction workers on site at the time. We were very fortunate in that 249 survived. One person is still missing, and presumed dead.

MF: Can you describe your fundraising activities?

MH: I'm involved with a group of individuals and organizations looking to fund specific projects in the smaller villages, where there are both immediate needs and longer-term sustainable development needs. The people of Thailand need two things: the first is tourists, because the ancillary effect of no tourism is more job losses; and secondly they need continued funds to directly support survivors, so they can start their lives again. I think it's wonderful how the Rotman School and alumni have supported the tsunami victims. While I am not aware of exactly how the Canadian Red Cross and others channel their funds, I'm sure those funds will go to good use. But I can attest to the fact that there is still desperate need out there. 



Supporting the Post-tsunami Sustainable Livelihood Rehabilitation Project

If Marvin's personal account of the recovery process in southern Thailand compels you to donate to a grass-roots-level charity, he recommends supporting the **Post-tsunami Sustainable Livelihood Rehabilitation Project** in Southern Thailand. This program has been started by the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), a well-respected non-profit group run by **Khun Mechai Viravaidya**, a former Thai Senator. Khun Mechai is known for his work in Thailand for the poor, especially in the fight against HIV/AIDS. For more information on how to support a cause that focuses on helping the smaller communities Marvin describes, please visit www.pda.or.th/cbers