

## A Sturdy New Home

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
Saturday, 11 June 2011 17:29

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As the rainy season loomed, Charlis and his wife worried that their dilapidated old hut might not provide much shelter. Tzu Chi volunteers, who had already taken care of them for a long time, built them a new home. In just three weeks, they built a sturdy new house entirely by hand. Now the old couple sits contentedly, surrounded by people who love them.

Old H. T. Charlis had never had so many visitors in his home at once. It was, after all, just a small shelter, certainly not big enough to accommodate the 15 Tzu Chi volunteers that had come.

Charlis and his wife, P.G. Karunawathi, appeared uneasy. They were embarrassed that their hut was too small and the roof too low for people to stand upright. They were also worried about the smoke that hung in the air, lingering from cooking a meal not long before. But the crowd of visitors didn't seem to mind the lack of space, the low roof, or the smoky air. They were focused rather on the joyous reason for their visit. They had brought with them bunches of woven coconut leaves and lumber to replace the leaky roof under which Charlis and his wife had lived for six years.

### A meager subsistence

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Tzu Chi built a Great Love village in Hambantota, on the southern tip of Sri Lanka. Afterwards, local Tzu Chi volunteers began to visit the region regularly to offer help to the needy.



Tzu Chi volunteers first met Charlis in 2006. He was 65 at the time, sitting with swollen legs in front of an old shed he called home. He and his wife had previously lived with their son's family, but sadly that arrangement broke down under the weight of a strained relationship with the daughter-in-law. The couple moved into a rudimentary hut behind their son's house.

At first, Charlis and Karunawathi tended a few crops in the yard for a meager subsistence. But as they aged, working the crops became too strenuous. Eventually, they turned to begging to sustain themselves.

Though his swollen, numb legs could not be cured, the doctor had required Charlis to stay on medication. Once a month, he staggered on his crutches to a government-run hospital nearby to pick up free medicine.

When the Tzu Chi Hambantota office learned of the couple's predicament, they decided to start giving them daily necessities and 1,000 rupees (US\$9) a month. Four years later, Tzu Chi is still looking out for Charlis and his wife, helping them to get by with donations of goods and a small

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monthly stipend.

When visiting the old couple to deliver aid, Tzu Chi office staff members often took the opportunity to talk to the son and daughter-in-law and urge them to take better care of their elderly parents. But the young couple only agreed to provide them with water and electricity and expressed no intention of taking them back to live with them. As a result, Charlis and his wife continued to live in the hut by themselves.

### **Coconut thatched roof**

As several rainy seasons came and went, the plastic sheets on the roof of the little hut gradually began to crumble and decay. Eventually, the plastic wasn't able to keep out the water, and the roof began to leak. When Tzu Chi volunteers delivered relief goods to Charlis and Karunawathi in October 2010, they were alarmed by the condition of their home. The volunteers decided to replace the leaky roof before the next rainy season started. This set the stage for a visit from 15 volunteers bearing thatch and lumber.

Traditional dwellings in Sri Lanka are covered with roofs of woven coconut leaves. To be pliable, tough, and lasting, the leaves must be soaked in water for a whole day before being woven. L.K.G. Hansika Madumali, an employee at the Tzu Chi Hambantota office, took on the task of soaking and weaving the coconut thatch. She asked her mother and sister to help too. Word of the project got around, and it wasn't long before more than ten other volunteers gathered at Madumali's home to help with the weaving. Once they started, they worked as quickly and efficiently as possible, from dawn to dusk.

R.G. Wimalawathee was among those who helped with the weaving, even though she was not physically with the group at Madumali's home. It was too difficult for Wimalawathee to leave her own house to help; her legs had been badly injured in the great tsunami of 2004, and she was confined to a wheelchair. But as a resident of the Great Love village, she wanted to help others as a way to show her gratitude for what had been done for her. Tzu Chi volunteers delivered coconut leaves to her house for her to weave, and she helped from there.

### **Reconstruction**

On November 12, volunteers bearing the woven coconut thatch arrived at Charlis's hut. Even his son and daughter were on hand to help. Everyone was ready to start replacing the roof, until a volunteer examined the walls and windows. The volunteer, who was well versed in this line of work, informed the rest of the group that it wasn't just the roof that needed fixing—it was the whole structure, the walls and the windows too.

With so much of the old hut needing repair or replacement, the group decided to forego the repairs on the roof. Instead they decided to build a new mud house for the old couple.



Mud houses have long been traditional dwellings in Sri Lanka and are still widely in use. They

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are well-suited for the dry, hot climate of this tropical island nation. The low heat conductivity of mud allows the interior to stay cool, even under scorching sun. Furthermore, the building materials for mud houses are readily available for little cost, if not entirely free. The structures are made mostly of mud, tree trunks, and coconut leaves—raw materials that are abundant on the island. Thus, mud houses are cheap to build. In stark contrast, building a house using other types of materials, such as wood or brick, might cost 100,000 rupees (US\$900) or more.

Another reason to build a mud house is that it isn't very complicated. All it really takes are some willing hands and a few simple tools. The Tzu Chi volunteers were able and willing to supply those items, and so they began to plan for the construction of the new home.

### **Community support**

A monk first led the group in prayer, and then the construction project got underway. The first order of business was to secure the beams and posts for the home. The volunteers went into the woods and picked out suitable trees, chopped them down, and trimmed off the unneeded leaves and branches. When they were done, they carried the beams and columns back to Charlis's place. This task required quite a bit of physical labor and took them the whole of the first day to complete.

The following day, the volunteers gathered bright and early to start putting up the frame of the house.

H. B. Udeni Kumara, another employee at the Tzu Chi Hambantota office, enlisted the assistance of his father-in-law, K. Siripala, an expert builder. Siripala offered technical directions and tips to the volunteers, who largely learned as they did the work.

A neighboring couple who had often aided Charlis and Karunawathi in whatever way they could also pitched in to help. They volunteered to put the wooden door in place in the new house. The door was purchased with money donated by Madumali's uncle.

While the volunteers worked on the house, the old couple sat off to the side. They watched as the workers hustled to lay the foundation, erect the uprights, connect the beams, and tie intersecting sections of the frame securely together. After the layers of woven coconut leaves had been piled on each other to form the thatched roof, the structure began to look like a home. The old couple smiled.

One week of hard work later, the entire frame of the house had been completed. Next came the most challenging stage of the construction: fleshing out the mud walls.

To make the mud for the walls, volunteers first needed to dig into the ground to break up and loosen the clay soil. The ground was very dry after a long stretch of exposure to the sun, so it was particularly difficult to break up. But that didn't stop the volunteers. Though their muscles ached from the digging, they kept at the soil with their hoes until it was suitably broken and ready. Then they added water and turned the mixture over and over again until the perfect consistency was reached for application to the walls of the hut.

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When the mud was sticky and ready to be applied to the walls, one group of volunteers fetched a batch from its mixing puddle and carried it to the hut, where a second group of volunteers applied it by hand to the intertwined wood strips of the wall frame. They took care to fill every little hollow and cavity. Back and forth, the carriers delivered the mud to the second group, who added layer after layer and filled in each hole.

Everyone helped to build the new house. Volunteer D. Somawathi worked and worked, even though she suffered from asthma. Her family had received aid from Tzu Chi between 2006 and July 2010 to supplement her husband's meager earnings. The foundation even helped them move from their shabby hut to a better residence. In July 2010, when they moved in with her niece, they asked Tzu Chi to stop the aid. Somawathi volunteered to help Charlis build the new hut as a way to pay back the help that she and her family had received from Tzu Chi.

Like everyone in the group, three-year-old Sanuli Methsahani did her part. She was the only child of Kumara, one of the Tzu Chi staffers. For several days, little Sanuli came with her parents and helped build the hut, humming happily as she fetched this and that for the others. The child's happy singing added merriment to the scene.

When the frame had been completely plastered up with mud, volunteers left it alone for a few days to bask and dry in the sun.

After that, there was only one more thing to do before the walls were totally completed. Volunteers, standing about two meters (79 inches) from the walls, hurled balls of mud which splattered upon hitting the wall. The volunteers then spread the splashes around to fill any remaining little voids. As a last step, they used trowels to smooth the walls and give them an eye-pleasing finish.

When the hut was finished, Charlis's wife, Karunawathi, said gratefully, "If it weren't for your help, I don't know how we could have gone on living."



### **Milk and jackfruit**

The big moment when Charlis and Karunawathi could finally move into their new home came in the early morning of November 30, 2010. The volunteers tied a red ribbon across the front door. The old couple, hand in hand, undid the ribbon and walked into their new home amidst applause and laughter.

For a change, they no longer needed to bend down to get into their home. The house was spotlessly clean, contained simple furnishings, and even featured a mud stove for cooking. Some volunteers had brought snacks and others had brought cooking pots to celebrate this special occasion. A festive air filled the place.

The old couple honored the local customs for moving into a new house. They made a fire inside

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the hut and heated a pot of milk until it boiled and spilled over. Then Karunawathi, the woman of the house, carried a bowl of clean water inside the house. After that, the couple planted a jackfruit seedling beside the house while everyone else looked on.

Everybody thought of Charlis and Karunawathi as their own grandparents. Several volunteers, taking time off from their regular responsibilities, had worked every day for almost three weeks to build the new hut. On this happy day, all gathered in front of the new house for group photographs. Everyone smiled broadly, but not as broadly as Grandma and Granddad.

Charlis thanked everyone. "Perhaps in my past life I did some good deeds that enabled me to receive so much warm help from so many good folks," he said. "We don't need to worry about rain or strong winds anymore now that we live in this home. My happiness is beyond description, and we're most grateful to you all!"

Compiled by Tang Zou Cie and Neo Xiaowen  
Information provided by L. K. G. Hansika Madumali and Uditha Asanka  
Translated by Tang Yau-yang  
Photos by Uditha Asanka

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