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Ladies and gentleman, friends of Phi Phi

I'm honored to stand for you on this wonderful evening. A very special occasion to support the people of Phi Phi. It is good to see familiar faces, but also to see new ones. So many have enclosed the people of Phi Phi in their heart.

More than a decade ago it happened to me. I arrived on one of the most beautiful places in the world, Phi Phi Don. From that day, I was in love....the island....the warm and friendly people, the smiles. Not soon after... I was living with my partner in this incredible place. We worked on a beach called paradise.

When my partner died I brought his ashes back to this island, because here we had spent the best times of our lives. The years went on, I got remarried and of course we had our honeymoon on Phi Phi as well.

We were watching television on Boxing Day and seeing our Thai friends in shock, we tried to contact them. Finally we got through in the middle of the night. We spoke with La my dearest friend. He told us what was happening, it horrified us and we were deeply worried. Based on the questions of our friend we realized that something had to be done and decided that I would go, while Ralph would stay home to generate support.

After arriving on the Island, I was surprised to see that there were no aid organizations in place. The only thing I saw was the Thai army and navy, clearing the bodies and bringing them over to Krabi on the mainland.

I returned to that mainland to look for the islanders, to see where we could give our best support.

The locals were in Krabi near a Mosque, totally in despair, also here there were no aid organizations present. I contacted Ralph and we decided that we should provide support directly... not tomorrow, but the same day.

We setup a central meeting point so that people could simply find each other again. Basic things had to be done; there was no food, no water and there were no places to stay.

Another phone call to Ralph and he contacted the other board members of the Chance4all foundation to raise funds and awareness of the situation. We used our personal funds to provide assistance. Through Chance4all we contacted our relations to ask for additional donations. At this moment the name HiPhiPhi was created as a positive greeting in these times of need.

Baby milk, fruit, rice and water were purchased and distributed. Ralph created a website to communicate about the actual situation, to inform the friends of Phi Phi abroad on the essential needs of the survivors.

A team of 25 local people was set up to assist with registering all that was lost. So many islanders missed everything they once owned, but most tragically: friends and family they loved. In less than five minutes, over 2000 people were killed and more than 100 children lost one or both parents. It was essential to detail each personal situation to provide direct assistance. We were struck by the magnitude, it made us all realize how deep the effect of the tsunami would be, both short and long-term.

All facts we had gathered we shared with the official government, this gave both the government and ourselves an objective few of the next necessary steps.

Some days over 1000 people visited the central meeting point. A medical team offered temporary help. In these weeks small charities and individual support actions popped up.

It was heart-warming to see how many people wanted to help, but coordination was also necessary. Gradually, Hi Phi Phi became an umbrella, to streamline these positive efforts. We simply supported each other by showing what had been achieved and communicated what was left to do.

Think of the beautiful colors of the daycare centre, built through support of the western residents, Alana, Kay, Doug and many others. And, the book of the children, which makes even a big man like me cry.

In the first month I visited the island frequently, either with a medical team or to help cleaning the school with staff members and also some prisoners. Officially the island was still in quarantine.

At the end of January, back home, Ralph was contacted by the assistant of Nick Harvey, a member of British parliament. She informed him that Darren Windett, a British man was on the island and that they were a bit worried.

Together with Neil and Jenny, two Phi Phi residents who had lost their house and business and almost their life on the island, Darren was cleaning shops of local people who were afraid to leave the island and their belongings. They started on the impressive task to clean over 6 feet of rubble. Debris what was left behind by the wave that struck Phi Phi in its heart. We got in contact with Darren to see how we could support them. Back in the shelter camps I asked the islanders who had the strength to help clean the island.

Wheel barrows, shovels, gloves and rakes were purchased, a nurse was found and off they went to the island. Darren, Neil and Jenny asked for volunteers on self made posters and Ralph did the same on the HiPhiPhi website.

Since then, so much has happened. From entire Korean teams, that just did not know how to stop cleaning and singing, to a lady taking care of the deserted cats. From fixing roofs and roads, to replant palm trees and the creation of a memorial garden. Islanders and volunteers, side by side.

Thai residents in the cleaning team, receive a basic salary for the hard and enduring work. This enables them to take care of their families. The Hi Phi Phi canteen provides food for those who can not afford it, currently around 200 people a day. None of this would have been possible without the help from sponsors and volunteers.

Up until today over 2000 volunteers have joined to work alongside the islanders. They brought back Phi Phi to a state where tourism is possible again. Their presence also ensured a basic level of income for the economy. After all tourism is down by 90%. This is a harsh situation. Everybody coming to Phi Phi is more than welcome.

Over 150 businesses have been opened, but still 70 % of Tonsai village is in ruins. The divecamp setup by Andres and Kay, cleans the sea daily of tons of debris. So we still have a long way to go. This community can do it, people like Clare, like La, like Dion who are not here tonight but are in our thoughts. But we do not have the financial capabilities to provide such needed long-term support. That is why a special evening like this is essential to help the Phi Phi community in the next phase of recovery.

Our clinic has an average of 30 patients a day and need medical supplies to continue. A cargo boat is necessary to provide transport possibilities for the local people, since so many of their own boats were lost in the waves. The infrastructure requires our full attention and much much more must be done. So therefore I am grateful to be here tonight and have the opportunity to explain what we did and what we will be doing to assist the Phi Phi People.

The chance 4 All foundation, and therefore HiPhiPhi as well, believes that positivity is essential to achieve results. We know how bad the impact of the tsunami was and how many lives were lost, yet we have to look positive into the future.

One thing makes us proud most of all: The smiles that can be seen on the island again. Volunteers and locals having a good time working together, learning to understand each other and through that... respect evolves.

I am happy to see so many smiles present here tonight as well.
Thank you for your belief and your support for Phi Phi.
People like you... make a true difference in this world.