

Tribune-Times

Posted Wednesday, January 18, 2004 - 6:00 am

<http://www.tribunetimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060118/TRIBUNETIMES01/601180334/1145>

By L.C. Leach III

TRIBUNE-TIMES WRITER



Steve and Jennifer Lorch breathed in and breathed out slowly, feeling at any minute they would be crushed in what seemed like a college stunt gone mad.

The young Mauldin couple had just boarded one of 10 passenger cars on a train leaving Talpai, a village of less than 1,000 people on the southern coast of Sri Lanka.

After only few minutes, they realized they would not only have to stand for the entire eight-hour journey, they might become accidental casualties.

"Each car had seating for only 34 people, yet in each one they crammed in 150 people, some of whom were literally hanging off the sides of the train," Jennifer said.

"And it was hot and sweaty and curry-smelling, and people were passing out from having to stand for so long."

Steve added: "It was brutal, and about half an hour into the trip, we asked each other, 'What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?'"

What they had gotten into was part of something they had committed themselves to doing back in 2003: dig new wells and bring safe drinking water to people in Third World countries through a ministry they call Hydromissions.

"There are a lot of people doing a lot of mission work around the globe and they always run into water problems," said Steve, a surgical nurse at Shriners Hospital in Greenville. "And that's what we want to be about: to have water as an outreach for the Gospel."

Their trip to Sri Lanka came one year after a tsunami wrecked the country's eastern and southern coasts, killing more than 40,000. The same tsunami in the Indian Ocean killed more than 200,000 people and left millions of others homeless in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries in the region.

Expecting the same kind of poverty and deplorable living standards they had seen on previous Hydromissions trips to Venezuela and the Sudan, the couple found that the people in Talpai were like a mass walking disease because of their need for fresh water.

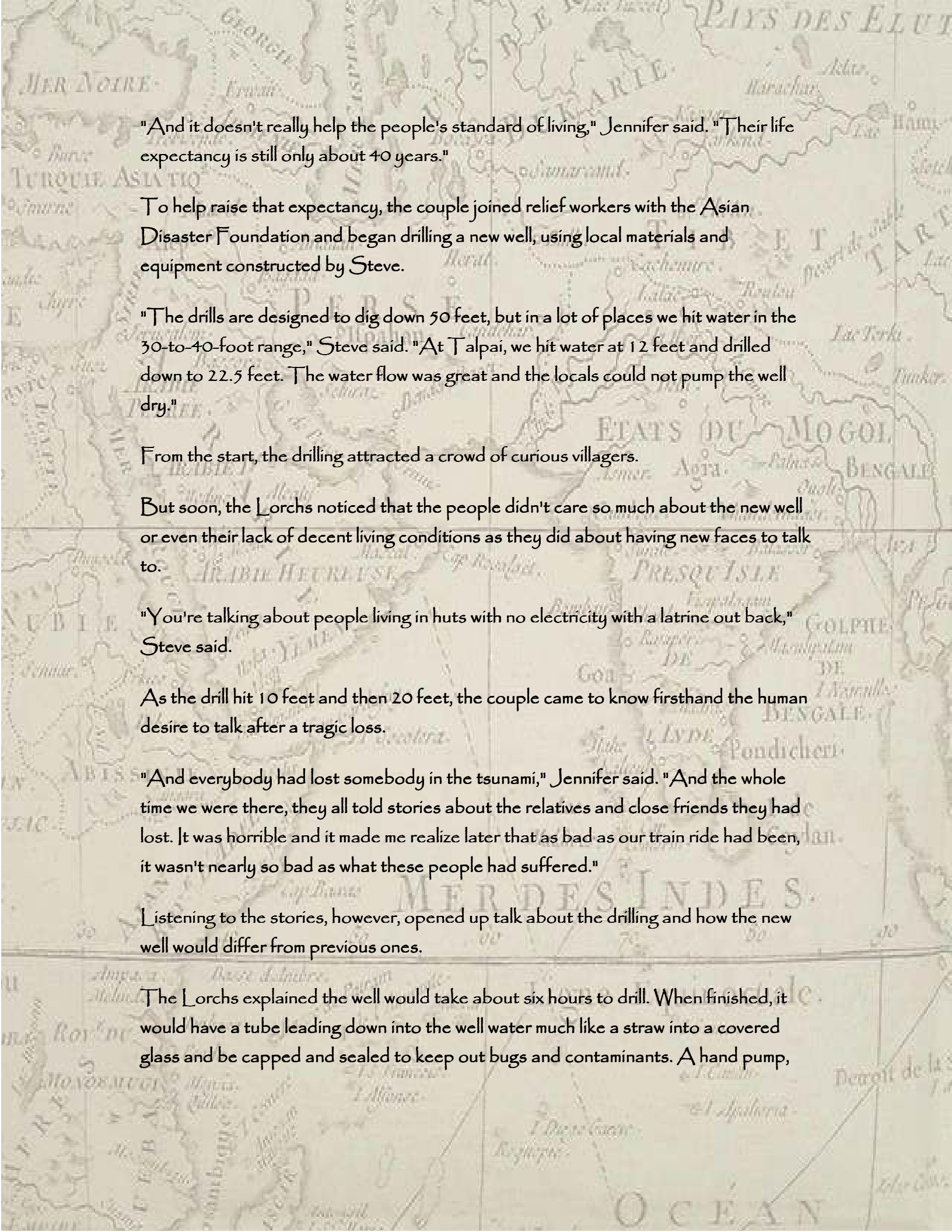
"The tsunami dumped a bunch of salt water and (dead) humans and animals into the drinking wells," Jennifer said. "All of them were contaminated."

Steve added that even without the tsunami, the drinking wells had long been a health hazard because they were open wells, home to frogs and mosquitoes and parasites.

When asked how the people survive drinking the unsafe water, Jennifer said it hinged on whether their immune systems adapted enough so they could survive childhood.

"The infant mortality rate is high," said Jennifer, whose regular job is working with children ages 1-3 with developmental delays through Babynet, part of the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. "But once they get past the early years, their systems become used to living with unhealthy water."

Attempts by the island government to supply villages with water from government water trucks was precarious at best, with delivery schedules as uncertain as the water's cleanliness.



"And it doesn't really help the people's standard of living," Jennifer said. "Their life expectancy is still only about 40 years."

To help raise that expectancy, the couple joined relief workers with the Asian Disaster Foundation and began drilling a new well, using local materials and equipment constructed by Steve.

"The drills are designed to dig down 50 feet, but in a lot of places we hit water in the 30-to-40-foot range," Steve said. "At Talpai, we hit water at 12 feet and drilled down to 22.5 feet. The water flow was great and the locals could not pump the well dry."

From the start, the drilling attracted a crowd of curious villagers.

But soon, the Lorchs noticed that the people didn't care so much about the new well or even their lack of decent living conditions as they did about having new faces to talk to.

"You're talking about people living in huts with no electricity with a latrine out back," Steve said.

As the drill hit 10 feet and then 20 feet, the couple came to know firsthand the human desire to talk after a tragic loss.

"And everybody had lost somebody in the tsunami," Jennifer said. "And the whole time we were there, they all told stories about the relatives and close friends they had lost. It was horrible and it made me realize later that as bad as our train ride had been, it wasn't nearly so bad as what these people had suffered."

Listening to the stories, however, opened up talk about the drilling and how the new well would differ from previous ones.

The Lorchs explained the well would take about six hours to drill. When finished, it would have a tube leading down into the well water much like a straw into a covered glass and be capped and sealed to keep out bugs and contaminants. A hand pump,

made of local materials, would be added, and then Steve and Jennifer would train people how to replace the equipment when necessary.

"This way, they can repair, maintain and rebuild their wells using local materials instead of having to rely on imported equipment," Steve said. "But there's still thousands of these open wells there that need to be changed."

According to a 2004 report by UNICEF and the World Health Organization, more than 1 billion people drink unsafe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion do not have access to basic sanitation.

Right now, the Lorchs fund all their missions work through sales of drilling equipment, individual and group donations, and through scented bars of soap which Jennifer makes at home and sells at whatever price someone is willing to give for them.

"Over Christmas, I sold over 1,000 bars, and that funded our missions trip to Sri Lanka," she said. "And 100 percent of all donations go directly to a project that we do in the field."

The Lorchs stayed 10 days on the island, but it seemed shorter.

On the last leg of the train trip out of Talpai, the Lorchs received an unexpected reward.

"We got a window seat and didn't have to stand up anymore," Jennifer said.

But more than any previous missions trip, their time in Sri Lanka served as the benchmark for what they hope will, in time, become full-time work.

"Right now, we're both working, paying the bills, and getting to do Hydromissions projects such as Sri Lanka once or twice a year," Steve said. "But we eventually want to get to the point where we're full time in the field."

