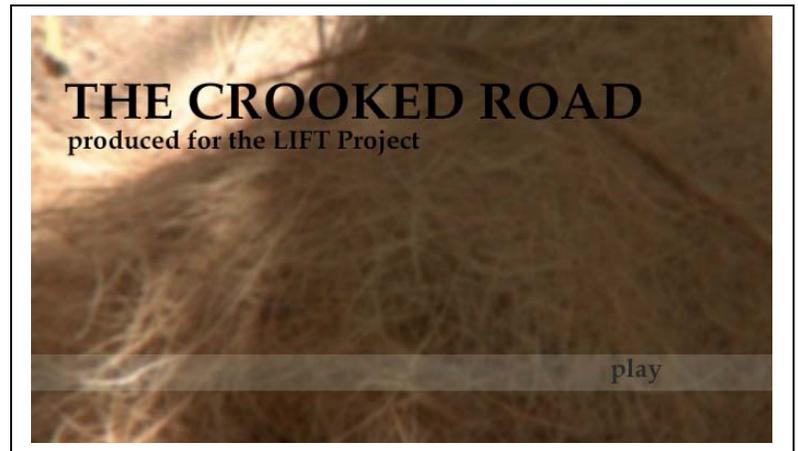


The LIFT Project **- written by Stewart Thom (2L)**

My “internship” operated a little bit differently from conventional internships offered by the IHRP. One of the major differences between my experience and internships proper was that I was not, per se, tied to any particular organization prior to embarkation. The LIFT project was created in response to the tsunami and has as one of its goals raising funds for an NGO working in a particular area of humanitarian concern or crisis. It was formed by a group of students and generously given support by the faculty. We received a stipend to fund an internship, which would involve researching NGO’s working in Sri Lanka with a view to finding a suitable target organization for fundraising. Some of the issues we were concerned about were finding an organization that was in need, made efficient use of the resources made available to it, and played some role in the promotion of human rights or facilitation of access to legal services (read: a legal connection). Sri Lanka, being one of the hardest hit areas during the tsunami, was chosen as the country in which the internship would take place and the group did a substantial amount of research on organizations before it began. A call was sent out for the submission of proposals, highlighting the requirements that the selected intern would be entrusted with a considerable amount of latitude in determining the shape of the internship, that some kind of media or film element was preferred (for use in the fundraiser), and that the contacts which the group had established would be divulged after an applicant was chosen. I solicited some friends of mine who have a background in the film industry and experience with camera work and editing/post-production. By a pretty incredible stroke of luck they were in between projects, willing to go to Sri Lanka, and more importantly, willing to bring a load of really expensive equipment with them for the purpose of making a documentary. As the LIFT Project came together around the beginning of exams the bulk of the work began immediately after final submissions for written work were due. I spent about three weeks contacting organizations in Sri Lanka that I thought would be good sources of information on the ground and made whatever arrangements I could to conduct interviews with representatives from those organizations upon my arrival. As for planning, it was decided that I would do 6 weeks of



on the ground research and logistics, three weeks of shooting with the film crew and one week transcribing the Sri Lankan interviews so we could subtitle the film (+ a month editing in Canada).

The logistics were pretty staggering. In a country swarmed with NGO’s engaged in tsunami relief/reconstruction, drivers and translators who are worth their salt are remarkably hard to come by. Coordinating the interviews in a manner that they could be plugged into to a manageable schedule that would

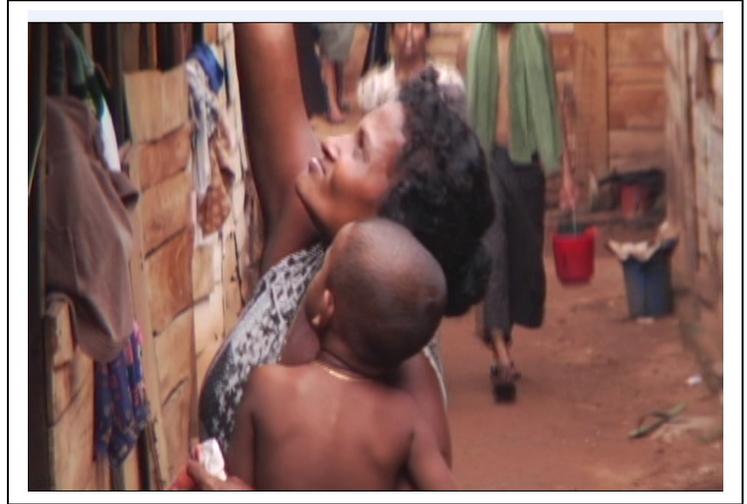


have us trekking around a substantial part of the country also proved quite difficult, and writing, directing and editing a movie is a lot harder than it looks.

The hardest part by far was finding a suitable organization. Upon investigating the contacts that the group had established before the internship I found that I had reservations about supporting the work that they were doing. For me the most valuable and personally enriching aspect of my internship was developing my understanding of what good work is. There is by no means one definition and a lot of my time was spend trying to isolate particular areas of need in a country that has had a lot of resources thrown at it, and discerning who is meeting that need effectively.

While there I interviewed a host of organizations: the Executive Director of the TRO, Executive Director of Transparency International, the Sri Lankan monitoring Mission, the Disaster Recovery Monitoring Unit, Director of Housing for UNHCR, Exec Director of MONLAR, the Reclaim Initiative, the ILO, the Center for Policy Alternatives, the Peace Secretariat, the Human Rights Commission and of course the organization I chose to focus the film on – the Siyath Foundation. At one point I found myself on stage with a microphone before representatives from over 150 humanitarian organizations (even though I was only asking for permission to film them).

Siyath is a woman's organization that began work nearly 20 years ago combating the poverty and marginalization of women working primarily in the coir industry. They started off organizing women into cooperatives with the goal of improving their standard of living and financial means through collective strength and have over the years developed into a strong promoter of women's rights, and women's rights education. The current director of the organization is also a lawyer and they have been getting involved both in running legal clinics for women who otherwise do not have access to legal services and also advocating for the ratification of ILO conventions that would help to improve the social security of workers in the informal sector. However, what I found most compelling about the organization was the manner in which the mechanisms developed to empower impoverished and marginalized women have adapted to the post tsunami environment and are now employed to facilitate community planning and reconstruction. One of the tragic aspects of the reconstruction process in Sri Lanka, in my humble opinion, is the lack



of community involvement in rebuilding and planning, the consequences of which the affected people themselves will have to live with for years and years to come. In the face of a disaster the scale of the tsunami it was very touching to see the manner in which the community cooperative structures not only weathered the fragmentation and destruction of the communities in which they existed but also became an outlet for bringing people back together and providing much needed emotional and physical support. Not only are the community cooperatives facilitating these families in re-establishing their livelihoods in the coir industry but they have also become a vehicle by which the community gathers and debates the equitable distribution of relief goods.

There's so much more to say but I'm already over the limit. Fortunately however, there is a movie, and I would strongly encourage anybody who has taken the time to read this to come on out to the fundraiser and see it yourself. As a movie, it has turned out far better than I had expected it to, and as an experience I can say that it has been one of the most rewarding, and certainly one of the most memorable, opportunities made available to me in my time at UofT.