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Margate native recounts living through the tsunami

By JOHN BRAND Staff Writer, (609) 272-7275

Ron Bauer grew up in Margate and, during his time there, became close friends with well-known beachgoer, author and world traveler Christopher Cook Gilmore, who died in July 2004 from brain cancer.

Inspired by Gilmore's tales of traveling to exotic places such as Morocco, Egypt and Africa, Bauer says on his Web site that he sold all his worldly possessions in 2000 and decided to hit the road. For five years, he and Gilmore sailed the coast of Essaouira, Morocco, in a boat Gilmore built.

Bauer spent some time at his Quincy Avenue home over the summer, but found himself in Sri Lanka when the tsunami hit Dec. 26. Below is his first-person account of what he saw and felt and the impressions the experience left on the Atlantic County man.

Dear Friends,

So you now know for sure that I'm fine. I am in Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka, where I have experienced the second natural disaster in my life, the first being the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco, which really seems like nothing after what I have seen here.

Let me tell you briefly what happened:

I was going to go snorkeling that Sunday morning at 8 a.m.; my alarm went off but I decided to sleep in (sometimes being lazy can save your life). At 9:00 I woke up and fiddled about in my room. At 9:30 I was brushing my teeth when I heard some big surf outside. I thought, "Excellent, I'll head to the beach."

Then I heard breaking glass and screaming.

Let me note that I was on the second floor of the Ranmal Guest House, and my room was the cheapest at the place, farthest from the beach.

After the sound of commotion, I ran out of my room and looked into the courtyard below. Strangely, it was filled with 3 feet of water. I was in my underwear, so I grabbed my baggies from the ledge, threw them on and ran to the restaurant balcony to see exactly what was happening and if I could



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help anyone.

By then there was six feet of water in the court and the sea was still rising. At that point the sea had risen 15 feet from normal level.

The people from the first floor rooms were struggling to stay afloat. Two girls in the front cabana were screaming and holding on to the doorframe for dear life.

Then two big set waves came in. They both had 7 foot faces and reached half way up the railing on the second floor. I watched the two girls take both waves on their heads, but they held on.

I was helpless.

There was so much debris that it was impossible for me to go down and help anyone.

Then after the two big waves, the ocean retreated back to its normal level.

It was an incredible thing to see: The ocean actually dropping 15 feet before your eyes in a matter of a minute.

That was it. It all lasted only a few minutes. It may not sound so incredible, but I get chills down my spine as I relate this to you.

People were cut up and hurt, but luckily no one from our hotel died.

The entire first floor was destroyed. The second floor was just wet.

Some hotels in the area are actually completely gone, just rubble.

There was a Sunday market going on in the center of the city and over 900 people died there. In total, over 3,000 people died in our little village alone.

For the rest of the day the surge came back every 30 minutes, but only rising about 9-10 feet and only putting a foot of water in our courtyard.

This was quite nerve racking. Every time the sea rose, people would scream and think that the big waves were going to come again.

So, I only got my feet wet and my room was not damaged at all.

We got water and electricity back today, and this morning I had my first hot meal since last Saturday night (an omelet with onions and CHEESE, God I love cheese!), it was the best meal I have had in my life.

Since then we have been living off water, crackers, little bread and bananas. I say we, because only I and a family of Austrians stayed at our hotel after the disaster.

They are 5 - mom, pop, older son, his girlfriend and the younger son. We eat our meager meals together and in the evening we play cards under candlelight.

They have really taken me in as one of the family and it has made the whole situation so much brighter.

I have spent the last five days picking up glass, shoveling sand and gook and generally cleaning up around the hotel.

The hotel rewards our efforts with free warm beer every night. I won't go any further.

Today things are quite good, I even sit at a computer communicating with



friends!

I have decided not to change my plans and I will be here, in Hikkaduwa, for about 10 more days.

Once the rest of the cleanup is done, I will sit down and write the complete story which includes touring a town that has been demolished, seeing a dead person floating in the ocean, and the reactions of the local people.

I also have pictures of the disaster. I will post it all on my Website, www.lookingforelvis.com in a week or so.

Normally, there is a great celebration this evening with the beaches packed with people and fireworks going off all around. But not this year.

Sri Lanka has decided to make this the day of mourning for the over 29,000 people that have perished. I have mourned, but I believe it is better to celebrate life.

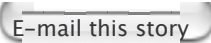
Tonight, I will sit around a candlelit table (for tradition) with my Austrian family. We will drink warm beer and whiskey and most likely play some poker.

We will enjoy ourselves and quietly celebrate the new year.

So please, have a wonderful evening, new year and know that I am well and enjoying life just as everyone should.

God bless you, all!!!

Amite Sincere, Ron



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