December 26 was a bright morning in Sri Lanka – a great day for the beach. It was Boxing Day as well as a Buddhist holiday celebrating the full moon. The port city of Colombo was unusually quiet. Jeffrey Lunstead, Gr’77, and his wife, Deborah, were preparing to attend a holiday luncheon.

Around 10:30 a.m., a friend called Lunstead, the United States ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with news of rising water along Sri Lanka’s coast. No further information was available. The situation didn’t seem urgent, so the couple went on with their plans.

But the phone kept ringing, and the news kept getting worse. Soon, the prime minister was calling, asking him to contact the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii to find out what had happened. Lunstead was shocked to learn an earthquake had sent a tsunami crashing across the shores of several South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka. The holiday forgotten, he spent the rest of the day on the phone and computer trying to get information and coordinate the embassy’s response.

By day’s end, 36,000 were dead in Sri Lanka, another million were homeless and 700 miles of coastline were devastated. Phone lines were down and cellular phone transmissions were overloaded. The worst destruction was in remote areas. No one would know the extent of the damage for three days. “Like the rest of the world,” says Lunstead, “we had to rely on media reports and the Internet to piece together what had happened.”

The embassy received reports of about 2,000 Americans who might have been in the area that day. Lunstead sent teams to every hotel to try to locate them. For days, his staff of 40 worked around the clock, obtaining passports; arranging medical care; and providing clothing, airline tickets and cash for what turned out to be roughly 100 American victims. They also contacted the families of eight Americans who died and made arrangements for the disposition of their bodies. The staffers, as well as many Sri Lankans, opened their homes to displaced Americans until they were returned to the U.S.

But Lunstead’s work was just beginning: the Sri Lankans also needed help. First, he declared a disaster, which allowed U.S. funds to be released. Then he brought in a disaster response team to organize relief activities, and 1,600 military personnel to clear rubble,
transport supplies and provide medical care. Lunstead spent the following days and weeks overseeing the work of U.S. relief agencies and coordinating with other countries and international organizations, whose quick action he credits with preventing a secondary disaster due to hunger and poor sanitation. Within two weeks of the Boxing Day tsunami, he says, almost all survivors had received water, food, medical care and temporary shelter.

“Sri Lanka lost about 12 times as many people as the United States lost on September 11,” he says. “Another million were displaced. That’s especially significant in a country whose population is only 20 million [compared to nearly 296 million in the U.S.]. Everyone here lost someone. Things were chaotic, and we were running on adrenaline, but it was very satisfying to see so many people just wanting to help.”

Lunstead says it’s sobering for those who avoided the disaster to realize how easily they, too, could have been victims. The weekend before, he and his wife had visited a hotel he says was “smashed flat.” “You realize that there’s so much luck involved in what happened,” he reflects. “What if we had decided to go to the beach a week later?”

Perhaps that’s a reason why so many Sri Lankans have been moved to help. Lunstead says many have taken in friends, family and even strangers. Others have provided supplies for survivors. The Lunsteads themselves had hoped to give food to a friend taking necessities to the east side of the island, but when Deborah Lunstead went to the market, she found shelves already emptied by others with the same idea. “It’s been amazing to see how everyone is working together, people of all groups and ethnicities,” the ambassador says. “Everyone wants to help. There’s a lot to be learned from this. The tsunami didn’t care about ethnicities; we shouldn’t either.”

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That’s a significant lesson in a nation where ethnic strife has swept away 65,000 lives. From 1983 until a 2002 ceasefire, the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese government had been fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who want a separate state for the country’s Hindu minority. Lunstead has seen greater local cooperation among ethnic groups since the tsunami struck and hopes this could happen at the national level. “The main problem,” he says, “has been a lack of confidence and trust. If in the reconstruction efforts the two sides could begin to trust each other, that would go a long way toward moving things forward.”

Reconstruction will take years. Lunstead, who holds a doctorate in Asian and Middle Eastern studies and has focused most of his career on South Asia, says it’s a chance for the country to move forward politically and economically.

“Someone said to me, ‘When you rebuild a road, you don’t include the same old pot holes.’ That’s what needs to be done here. It’s a chance for the country to rebuild itself in a better way.”