

Tsunami Survivor Pitches In

Jackson resident Tim Walther wasn't feeling up to par on the morning of Dec. 26, 2004, the second day of a three-day stomach flu which inconveniently interrupted his climbing vacation in Thailand. As he slowly made his way down to the beach in Ton Sai, searching for fresh air to battle his aching stomach and foggy head, he was met by a mob of people running the opposite direction. For a brief moment Walther thought it odd that a group of adults would be playing a game, but then their screams began to register. He couldn't understand the cries spoken in Thai, but the emotional behind them was clear.

"It was pure terror," Walther said.

He began running to the beach, trying to make sense of what could cause everyone to flee in fear. Walther got his answer when he found a small British girl along the way.

"The sea, it's swallowing people up!," she said .

Walther reached the beach in time to see the second of three 20-foot waves bearing down on the island, where wreckage and debris already littered the shore. He had felt the earthquake in the morning, but it never occurred to him that later in the day he would stand facing a tidal wave. "It was mesmerizing," he said of Railay Beach as the wave approach. He ran at the last minute, water still reaching up to his knees and giving him an idea of the power that caused the deaths of nearly 200,000 in southeastern Asia. At the time Walther couldn't imagine the scope of the disaster; only 20 people, most of them fishermen, had been killed in the surrounding area. Little information was making its way into the community and it took more than a day for the picture to begin to take shape.

Over the next nine days Walther and his friend, former Jackson resident Ryan Ernst, stayed and helped the small community begin cleaning up and rebuilding. "The climbers banded together to do what we could to help that local community," he said. "A lot of people ask why we didn't leave," Walther said. "It was an obvious no-brainer not to leave. That would have been almost abandoning the Thai people when they needed help." The climbers did what they could as people started returning to the area and the international relief efforts began. After returning home, Walther felt the need to do something more. "Coming back, having the experience, you can tell people about it, but it's a greater thing," Walther said.

His answer is the Thailand Tsunami Slide Show Fund-raiser, an event which will include images of the country, climbing and people as well as the disaster, narrated by Walther. Doors open at 7 p.m. on Thursday in the Fellowship Hall of St. John's Episcopal Church, 170 N. Glenwood. A \$5 minimum donation is requested at the door. Walther hopes to raise \$10,000. Walther is finalizing details of how donations will be distributed to tsunami victims, but he said he hopes to find a way to get every cent possible directly to people affected by the disaster.

For more information on the fund-raiser, call Walther at Grand Dynamics at 733-1989.