

Lifesaving Decision Leads Lawyer to Start Foundation

By Kenneth Davis

When Ventura attorney Mark Kirwin took his family on vacation last year, he had no idea that the experience would change his life forever.

On Dec. 25, Kirwin, his wife, their two young children, his brother and a friend flew into Ranong, Thailand. When Kirwin, a name partner with Ventura-based Haffner, Haffner & Kirwin, and his family arrived at the Ranong airport after spending a week in Chang Mai in Northern Thailand, they made a last-minute decision to stay not at the beach but instead at a lodge in the canyon 20 minutes away from the beach.

That decision saved their lives. The next morning, tsunami waves hit the beach where the family had planned to stay, killing 170 people and wiping out the village.

For the next few days, Kirwin, his wife, Angela Kirwin, his brother and friend helped the tsunami victims.

"I felt like I was given a second chance to help people out," Mark Kirwin says.

"We purchased food and water for the villagers who had survived with nothing but their lives," he says. "We helped local police and military bag the food and water, so they could take it to the survivors."

"After we realized the tsunami hit," says Angela Kirwin, a Web developer, "we worked in the hospital and helped victims who were pretty beat up.

"We tried to help get them clothes and help them find lost family members."

"I think anybody would have done the same thing," she says.

On returning home to the states, the couple created the nonprofit Kirwin International Relief Foundation to help those whose lives were devastated by the tsunamis. Through the foundation, they organized a fundraiser, and Mark Kirwin returned to Ranong in January and most recently in late May to use the funds they had raised.

He says that, on his most recent trip, he focused on setting up his orphan educational scholarship fund for children who have lost their parents. The scholarships are long-term educational scholarships. He set up the accounts for the scholarships and established the contracts.

The money his foundation raised also went toward water storage tanks, water collecting materials, tools and boats, among other items for Moken villagers.

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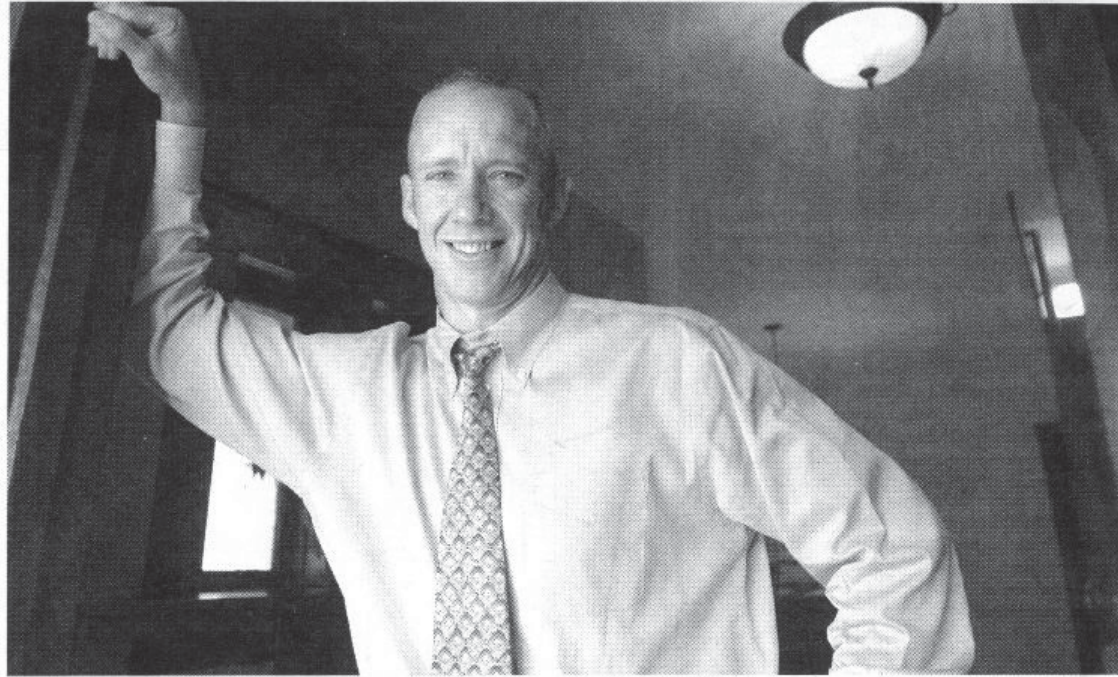


Photo by Hugh Williams

After surviving the tsunami in Thailand, Mark Kirwin created the Kirwin International Relief Foundation to help those whose lives were devastated by the tsunami. Then he held his first fundraiser. "With the money we raised, we were able to help many victims," he says.

to help many victims of the tsunami," he says. "The trip was very successful."

Although Kirwin focused on setting up the scholarships during his most recent trip, in January he was helping to rebuild.

"We purchased the materials to build a sustainable fish farm and the wood to rebuild a fishing boat," he says of his January trip to Ranong. "We provided clothes and purchased books, art supplies, tennis and soccer balls and water for school children.

"I also gave villagers hammers, saws and levels, which I had brought with me in a suitcase, to rebuild their homes and boats."

Angela Kirwin says that being a parent herself helped her sympathize even more with the parents who had lost children.

"This is something that crosses all barriers," she says. "We both love our children."

She says that they kept their two young children, Kai, 8, and Makani, 5, away from the hospital and the news when they were

in Ranong.

She and her husband took turns watching their children and providing assistance to the villagers.

Mark Kirwin, who's a mediator and a litigator, says his legal background has been an incredible asset in establishing a nonprofit organization.

"The ability to analyze situations has helped tremendously in accessing people and situations, skills developed through mediation and litigation," he says.

He says that being a lawyer has been very helpful in establishing contracts for his fundraising efforts, such as his orphan scholarship fund.

"The funds go directly to the people," Kirwin says. "There is no middle man."

He says that a lot of bogus fundraising outfits come out of the woodwork in the wake of catastrophic natural disasters such as the tsunamis and that his legal experience helps in weeding out the legitimate

people who really want to help the victims.

"As a litigator, you make a deal, and you're committed to it," he says.

Angela Kirwin says one of the pluses of the foundation is the people she has met in Thailand.

"I made some wonderful friends, and I'd really like to see them again in a happier place," she says. "It's really so gratifying being part of the relief effort, and there were a lot of beautiful moments."

She says the experience helped her realize how easy it was to help people. She also says their children have reacted positively to their establishing the foundation.

"The kids are really, really proud of their father," she says. "They brag about him to their friends and teachers."

Mark Kirwin says his experience has caused him to completely re-evaluate his outlook on life.

"The little things aren't that important," he says.