



Friday, January 28, 2005

## Pair makes sacrifices to provide relief

By Chris Markuns  
*Staff Writer*

For very different reasons, Sean Thistle and Tara Reardon are an unlikely local tandem embarking tomorrow on a monthlong tsunami relief effort in Sri Lanka.

Reardon, a 26-year-old Lawrence firefighter and native, has never stepped off U.S. soil, preferring to stay close to home and admitting that "even before the tragedy, it wouldn't be a place I would want to go." Or in Thistle's words: "She gets nervous when we go to Methuen."

Thistle, her roommate, has done more international traveling than the average 22-year-old, but had barely finished unpacking from a two-month stint teaching English to children in Venezuela.

Yet here they go, about to drop out of their personal lives entirely and board a 24-hour flight to a place they know nothing about, tackling mystery jobs they won't get until they arrive. Sri Lanka accounts for more than 30,000 of the roughly 160,000 confirmed fatalities in last month's tsunami in Southeast Asia.

"It's just such a huge tragedy that happened," said Reardon, who has been the driving force behind their trip -- her online search turning up Global Crossroad as just about the only agency to coordinate their journey.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said. "It just feels like I've got to do a little bit more."

Thistle, an emergency medical technician in paramedic school, feels the same way. "We're both kind of emergency personnel and when we see people in rough situations, we want to get in there and help out," he said. "I think we're just more (hands-on)."

But it is a decision not without a price, both fiscal and otherwise. For starters, Global Crossroad is strictly a liaison, arranging the contacts and work but leaving the \$2,500 plane tickets and estimated \$125-per-week living expense in the hands of the volunteers.

Reardon has the professional support of her fellow firefighters -- who worked 16 shift swaps to cover for her -- and is taking any financial help she can get, with contributions being accepted in her name at the Lawrence Firefighters Federal Credit Union.

But Thistle, having just returned from Venezuela, wasn't able to get another leave of absence from his job at Patriot Ambulance Service. So he quit.

"That's the way it rolls sometimes," said Thistle, confident he will find something when he gets back.

"(Tara and I) both knew we were going because it was really important to us," he said. "I weighed the consequences before doing it."

The trip itself is still largely an open question. They received a rough itinerary and recommended shopping list -- mosquito netting, potent insect repellent, anti-malarial drugs, flashlights -- and know they will be landing at the airport in Colombo, Sri Lanka. But from there, they don't know exactly where they will be taken or what job they will be assigned -- it could be anything from repairing a school to working with orphans to building an airstrip.

They're hoping it will put their medical training to use, but it may require nothing more than their sweat.

The culture will be another revelation. They have been everywhere looking for something comprehensive on Sri Lanka and the most they have learned is that a lot of curry is used in the food. They are socially conservative -- "Women can't wear shorts and short sleeves," Reardon said, "but I think they'll be a little lax with that" -- and at least some of the population speaks English.

"We'll pretty much find out when we get there," Reardon said. "Hopefully, I'll learn something."

[Next Story: Lawrence man killed in shipyard collapse](#) 