

The man who saved his village

by William Hermann , The Arizona Republic

Harindra Fernando and the other scientists studying the tsunami that ravaged Sri Lanka have heard amazing stories of tragedy, loss, sacrifice and heroism.

But none more amazing than that of Victor Desosa, headman of the village of Galbokka, a man who likely saved thousands of lives.

Arizona State University Professor Fernando and other scientists stopped Thursday in Galbokka to learn why, though the area was hit hard by the giant wave, only one life was lost. In similarly hard-hit areas, as many as one-third to one-half of the residents were swept to their deaths.

As the team sought along the narrow road on the southwestern coast for a turnoff to the village, a woman who was asked for directions pointed down a narrow dirt track. "You must talk to Victor," she said. "It's because of him that we didn't die."

Soon Fernando and five other scientists on a team sponsored by the U.S. National Science Foundation were sitting in the hard-dirt yard in front of Desosa's modest home, a home now badly damaged and surrounded by debris swept in by the wave. They asked him why so few had died, and he said he first had to give them a little personal history.

He said that he had been a merchant marine sailor for 23 years, until 1987.

"In the summer of 1982, our ship was outside the harbor of Valparaiso, Chile, and most of the crew had gone into town," he said. "While I was sitting there, the ship began to shake. I ran to the deck, looked at the city and saw the buildings swaying.

"I prayed to God! What will happen to the crew? Of course, what was happening was the earthquake that killed so many people, but none of the crew. This terrible thing made a great impression on me."

As Desosa spoke to the researchers, villagers slowly emerged through the palm and teak trees surrounding the house and shyly walked forward. They nodded as their headman spoke.

"On December 26, I was down by the ocean, talking to a friend, and I saw that the water was shaking. I thought, there is some problem in the middle of the sea." Then, Desosa said, the water level began to rise.

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"I did not know exactly what was happening, but the feelings I had in Chile were back and I knew we had to get out of our village. I began to hoot and shout to people to run inland, to run up on the hills."

Villager Kanathi Jaykodi, 40, interrupted for Desosa and said, "He can hoot very loudly, and we heard him shouting, 'Go! Go!' and understood we must run. And we did run."

And as the people closest to the shouting headman ran, they spread the word. Soon the entire village and surrounding populous were scrambling uphill. It was a blessing they did, for hard on their heels, the 20-foot wall of water that claimed so many others smashed into their village.

"We got to the high ground, and I thanked God," Desosa said. "I am so grateful I was able to use my experience gained so long ago to such good purpose now."

When Desosa finished, a subtle exchange of nods moved among the researchers. One of them noted that about 5,000 people live in the area around the village, and it was a simple fact that only one person died in the tsunami. Later, Costas Synolakis, a University of Southern California wave expert, said, "This man's story sounds right. This is exactly how lives are saved in tsunamis. Someone figures out what is coming and sounds the alarm." Fernando said the evidence speaks for itself.

"He realized what was happening, got people moving, and saved probably thousands of lives," Fernando said. "He had paid attention in Chile."