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Local builders sending homes to tsunami victims

by Vance Gutzman

Hewers of wood are helping victims of water.

The owners of a local home-building company are putting their unique skills to work to assist people in Sumatra who are still struggling to survive, after a devastating tsunami nearly two years ago swept away practically everything they owned.

John Mac Donald and Kim Knight, owners of Algonquin Timber Frames, have been busy in recent months building pre-fabricated timber frame homes that will be shipped to a community about 15 km inland from Banda Aceh, at the northwestern tip of Sumatra.

The unique structures utilize tenon and mortice joinery, which allows them to be easily assembled once they reach their destination.

That's where the external cladding will be attached to the timber frames, including steel roofs and concrete-panelled walls.

"They're over there right now working on the foundations," Knight said last week, while conducting a tour of the assembly operation that's located on Brian Burke's property, just off Josie Lane.

Knight and Mac Donald became involved in the international venture through the sale of one of their homes to a McMaster University professor named Mark Risk.

Risk just happens to be a marine ecologist who spent many years working in Sumatra, and he took the plight of the tsunami survivors to heart.

Risk pulled together a network of his friends, and together they were able to find a donor who is willing to pay for the construction and shipping of the homes.

"They came up with the general design and I tweaked it a bit," said Mac Donald.

"We wanted to build traditional post and beam structures that are earthquake resistant."

That involves the use of lightweight timber, in this case, hemlock, which will resist the moisture of the tropics, and is also low cost.

The real beauty of the homes is that it will only take one day apiece to assemble the homes once they've reached Sumatra.

And they're designed to be assembled using just manual labour - a fact that is especially important seeing as how the tsunami wiped out much of Sumatra's electrical infrastructure.

Algonquin Timber Frames has so far finished making 18 of the 20 homes that are destined for the tsunami relief.

Knight and Mac Donald have been assisted in the construction work by daughter Caitlin and Brian Burke and his son Eamon.

"On any given day we'll usually have three work stations going," Knight explained.

They expect the homes will be shipped out in the next few months, and plan on being in Sumatra towards February or March to help in their reconstruction.

"I never really travelled much before," said Mac Donald with a grin.

"And I like the winter, but I don't mind giving it a go over there."

More importantly, the couple wants to see the fruits of their labours up close and personal.

"You look at all the problems in the world today," said Mac Donald.

"It's nice to get an opportunity to do your little drop in the bucket."