

# Quad Club Swim-with-Chris Newsletter

April 2005

You will all know that Chris Fonfe, the resident Marlow Quad Swimming Teacher, has been away in Sri Lanka since February, teaching swimming as part of the national post-tsunami stress relief effort. After launching a swimsuit collection campaign in Marlow, she flew out to Sri Lanka on her own initiative and teamed up with a local group, [www.aidsrilanka.org](http://www.aidsrilanka.org) with whom she launched her swimming project to teach Sri Lankan women and children affected by the tsunami to swim. Chris has centred her operations down in the south of the island, just outside the town of Matara, near where over a thousand souls were drowned when the tsunami struck the crowded holiday Colombo to Matara train.

The destruction of the coastal region is well documented and many tourist facilities were washed away. Finding a repairable or functioning swimming pool has been a bit of a challenge. One also has to appreciate that despite being an island race, few Sri Lankans outside the well developed cities can actually swim, and especially not women and young girls. The result is that many of the 30,000 who drowned in the tsunami were women and children. As an interim measure, Chris has been hiring a number of hotel pools and, with the aid of a gold-medallist Sri Lankan Lifesaver, Mr Yasarathne, and Sri Lankan university student, Miss Inki Abeyrathna, has graduated her first class of 30 children from an absolute, non-swimming, scratch start. On the other hand, getting adult women, to swim is a cultural problem as they traditionally do not wear swimsuits on the beach and would not allow themselves to be seen dressed thus in the presence of men in a public pool.



*Chris' Jungle Pool – not overly big but perfectly secluded*



*Chris with trainee swim teacher-cum-interpreter, Inki*

Chris solved this by finding a half-empty but secluded pool located on high ground on a coconut plantation. Chris was joined for the Easter Holidays by her husband, Mike, a retired RAF officer, and her son James, who is also a swimming teacher at the Quad. The jungle pool required some work to bring it on-line and this was Mike's first task on arrival. After fixing up the electrics and trucking-in water bowsers all through the night, the pool was soon ready. As Mike is not a swimming teacher, he volunteered himself to the nearest school, the xxxxxxxxxx in Weligama, to help teach English.

Chris came to the school to give her swimming brief to the School Principal, Mr xxxxxxxx and suggested that perhaps the female school teaching staff also ought to be taught to swim so that they, in turn could teach their own and other children. The idea was immediately taken up. When the first group of lovely sari-clad ladies turned up for their first lesson, Mike, James, the gardener and all male staff were banished to the jungle whilst the ladies, who had never before in their lives been in a swimming pool, selected their swimsuits donated by Marlow and Maidenhead residents. In no time at all, they were in her the pool and nervously getting the feel of being surrounded by so much water. Despite living by the sea, none of them had ever been in any water deeper than their ankles. By the third day, Mike was summonsed back – the ladies were having so much fun and had gained so much confidence, they demanded to be photographed in their swimsuits, in the pool, so they could take the pictures home as evidence to show their unbelieving friends in the village that they were really were learning swim. The first cultural barrier had been broken and the word was out in Sri Lanka: Come Swim-with-Chris!

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*Chris with her first graduating class in Sri Lanka*

Following on immediately from the initial graduation, the additional momentum to teach adults would not have been possible without the get-up-and-go of Chris, the support of those in Marlow who donated swimsuits, friends in the British High Commission in Colombo, Sam Clark of the local [www.aidsrilanka.org](http://www.aidsrilanka.org) team on the island itself, husband Mike (who fixed the pool) and son James, the original Brat of Brat Camp (who made good by becoming a swimming teacher himself and taught the male teachers) plus, of course, the amazingly lovely smiling people of Sri Lanka: thanks to them all.



*The ladies of Weligama and Scholarship Candidate Inki, right.*

Having launched a program for these mature mothers, Chris has had to stay on in Sri Lanka for an extra six weeks to ensure that her pioneering group can get beyond just learning to swim themselves, but can also begin to teach others under supervision. Chris and the group would now like to launch a Sri Lankan Womens' Swimming Association, to run swimming courses on a long term charitable basis. She has launched a scholarship fund to bring her first and most promising swimming student, Inki, to England in order to gain swimming teaching experience at the Marlow Quad Club and undertake a British ASA Swimming Teacher's Course before returning to Sri Lanka. Chris is looking for support for her scholarship fund and swimming teaching plans in Sri Lanka and expects to return to the UK in mid-May with Miss Inki Abeyrathna. If you would like to support the project, please contact her by email at [mandc.fonfe@macunlimited.net](mailto:mandc.fonfe@macunlimited.net) or leave a phone message on 01628 485 243.