



# Building Houses With Cement & Love



By Megara Tegal

Getting their hands dirty has never been this rewarding. The Alumni and students of the University of London External Programme took on their third annual build last week with a teeming group of 50 enthusiastic volunteers. They made history by becoming the largest local volunteer group Habitat for Humanity Sri Lanka has had since its inception about 20 years ago.

Graduates in law, economics and IT mixed cement, plastered walls and cemented floors on 28 July, helping rebuild 13 houses in Negombo. There is, however, a lot more to the project than merely helping the less privileged build their homes.



The project creates bonds between the alumni, as well as bonds between the new home owners, and allows the graduates to realise and experience how other sections of Sri Lankan society live.

### It's not just about giving back

"It's a nice team building project to do something together", shares Lisa Pierre, the International Events Manager of the University of London. "Volunteers aged 18 to 35, all whom have studied at the same institute but may not know each other; it's nice for them to feel connected and do something together. Some of them are from really wealthy families, and I think their image of Sri Lanka isn't a real everyday image."

The University of London Alumni, belong to several different institutions in Colombo, and have had little opportunity to connect with each other. The project cements bonds between the graduates who have never met before, but share the same degree, and create a large family of alumni. "Usually they would just get their degree and their connection with the university ends there. This project, however gives them the chance to connect and network, so the story goes beyond just getting your degree," explains Lisa. Michelle Jayaranjan, the Alumna International Chapter Leader, who

has been involved in past builds carried out in Payagala and Ja-Ela.

### Why they volunteer

Long time volunteer, Janani Wijetunga has been part of the build alumni since it began three years ago, and will continue to be a part of it. "At one point in my life I worked at an NGO and I picked up the volunteering bug from there, so when I heard about the alumni build I wanted to be a part of it. I was also curious, because I didn't know that Habitat for Humanity did projects in Sri Lanka and I wanted to check that out," she shares.

### How Habitat for Humanity works

"We are the first Chapter in the world to organise an event that isn't a cocktail or a dinner," says Lakshan Madurasinghe, who initiated the project. An alumna from the university, Lakshan was already involved with Habitat for Humanity when he decided to pitch the idea. He is now the vice president of Habitat for Humanity and helps out with the university alumni annual build.

Habitat for Humanity has since built over 12,000 houses; providing several families sturdy homes built with, at the risk of seeming corny, love.

