



Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

Editor's note: Becca is serving temporarily as Information Officer for Action by Churches Together, a disaster relief network supported by the World Council of Churches that has five partner agencies providing emergency relief and rehabilitation to the survivors of the West Sumatra earthquake of Sept. 30, 2009.

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Dear Friends,

As soon as he said "hello," Rafel had me. Or, rather, he would have had me with "hello" if Indonesians used it as a greeting. Here, the most common expression when meeting a friend or family member is, "Have you eaten yet?" which shows concern and as also a genuine offer of food.

So, to be precise, Rafel had me with, "Have you eaten yet?" which he delivered with a captivating grin as he escorted me from our car to the distribution post in the village of Pasir Lawas. I am accustomed to being greeted with a few stock phrases that Indonesian youngsters use to address Westerners: "Hello, Mister!" "Money, money" (said with an outstretched hand), or "What is your name?" It was refreshing to find a child whose first point of interest was a visiting stranger's status. This was no ordinary child, and I was instantly entranced.

Arriving at the entrance to the distribution post, Rafel paused and leaned against the gate, clearly at ease amidst the flurry of folks lined to get food. Rafel's charm and poise showed that he considered the entire village to be his home, so his initial greeting now made perfect sense. Rafel is the village's welcoming host.

Through further conversation with the villagers who had gathered around us, it became clear that Rafel had no home of his own. His parents had abandoned him and his younger brother a few months earlier when they moved to city of Padang, about 60 kilometres away. The village adopted him, and he has been staying in the home of an extended family of 15 people.

When the earthquake hit the village, Rafel happened to be shimmying his way up a coconut tree. He had wanted to enjoy a late afternoon drink of refreshing coconut water and was availing himself of the local abundance of coconuts. Before he had a chance to grab a coconut, however, the tree started swaying wildly. Rafel had trouble hanging on, eventually jumping to the ground and escaping unharmed. He ran to check the condition of his adopted family. Their house was badly damaged and no longer safe for habitation. That night the family moved out to the porch to sleep under a makeshift tent. The porch did not have room for 15 people, so Rafel began sleeping at the relief distribution post set up in the middle of the village. No doubt he also enjoyed being at the center of activity.

While I was talking to Rafel, a woman emerged from the crowd. It was clear that people had summoned her to see the Western woman who was interviewing her adopted son. She confirmed that she had been taking care of Rafel in the months since his mother and father departed. She then agreed to let me see their home. Since it appeared that the distribution was not ready to begin, we had plenty of time to walk the kilometer to her quarters. She gave me a tour of the emptied



Rafel climbs a tree in the yard of his adopted home to reenact his experience of the earthquake.

house. As with all Padang homes damaged by the quake, the family had completely emptied the house of its contents.



Rafel (right) stands with members of his adopted family—Fahri and her grandmother, Uni Zamzani—on the family's front porch in Pasir Lawas, West Sumatra, October 7, 2009.

Standing in her abandoned kitchen, she described how frightening the earthquake had been, but at the same time how grateful she was that her family had survived. We moved out to the porch, where the entire contents of their home were piled beside canned fish and instant noodles from previous food distributions. An assortment of mattresses and pillows nestled infant grandchildren enjoying a midday nap. Perhaps we as Westerners can't imagine having to sleep on a porch in such cramped quarters with one's children, grandchildren, and various in-laws. Yet it is clear that the Indonesians, while not exactly relishing having to sleep outdoors, nevertheless find a certain comfort in having one's precious loved ones beside them through the long nights as they lie in fear of another quake.

As consummate host, Rafel accompanied us on the tour of his adopted home and did a quick demonstration of cooking in the makeshift outdoor kitchen. He also climbed a tree to re-enact his experience when the earthquake hit. Since the earthquake, Rafel said he had been busy being, in his own words, a hero. He went from house to house helping people clear out the rubble from their damaged homes, offering his services voluntarily. When asked what he hopes to be when he grows up, he flashes that charming smile again and declares, "a hero." Who knows what the future holds for this small child, whose life has been shaken to its very foundations this year, both literally and in terms of his family situation? What is clear is that for the moment he has become the local hero and ambassador for the people of the village of Pasir Lawas.

In Christ's peace,

Becca