**Different faces of Khao Lak**

By Christie Tan

AS I stood by the sea, the smell of death lingered in the air. The eerie sound of crashing waves filled my heart with terror.

I tried to imagine how horrifying it must have been for the people in Khao Lak in southern Thailand on Dec 26 last year when they confronted giant 12m-high waves.

I still can’t fully grasp or understand the event. I can only try to put myself in the shoes of the victims and their families.

I was in Khao Lak from April 25 to May 6, as part of a tsunami relief mission organised by Singapore Management University.

What struck me most was the juxtaposition of life and death.

Destruction — rubble and concrete strewn around, houses with their roofs blown off and large gaping holes in the middle — lay side by side with an apparent normalcy. There were signs of the locals going about their daily lives: houses being rebuilt, wares being peddled and roadside stalls being set up.

Loss and hope. Grief and resilience. This was reality for the people of Khao Lak.

As I spoke to the locals, one thing was clear: They wanted to stand on their feet again. Women were learning new skills such as weaving straw baskets and bags, sewing and painting batik. Children were taught how to string beads and shells together to make accessories.

A villager told a group of us how much the people wanted to make money with their own hands. Though he had lost some of his friends to the sea, and others had yet been found, he felt life had to go on.

The resilience and bravery of the people stood out.

Indeed, it was the heart-wrenching stories of many of the villagers and their determination to get their lives back on track that inspired the volunteers to do whatever they could for the people.

Volunteer Lee Yuwei said: “What kept me pressing on was the urgency of the survival of Khao Lak. To me, it seemed to be a dead, flattened town which was once buzzing with activity and on which the livelihoods of many depended.

“The dead are already dead, but there is still hope —”

Inflamed to be part of many to help reconstruct and improve their current state of lives despite how small my contribution may be.”

Another volunteer, Milli- cent Chen, 22, observed: “It wasn’t about us. It was about the bigger picture. It’s about the connection we forged, even when we leave.”

We were all touched in different ways.

I was reminded to be thankful for the little blessings I had each day, and thankful for this thing called life.

The writer is a second-year social science student at Singapore Management University.