

“I Lost The Love Of My Life”

The December 2004 tsunami took the lives of more than 200,000 people. One of the lives lost was Simon Atlee, the love of international model Petra Nemcova’s life. Here, Petra tells CW about her very personal story.

By Tracey Porpora

Clinging to a palm tree for more than eight hours with a broken pelvis, Petra Nemcova managed to survive the Dec. 2004 tsunami. This 26-year-old native of the Czech Republic who reached international stardom when she graced the cover of Sports Illustrated in 2003, has written a book, *Love Always, Petra* (Warner Books, \$23.95), about her courageous tale of survival, which includes the death of her boyfriend, Simon Atlee, a fashion photographer, amid the ferocious tsunami. She spoke with CW about this horrific experience, her new mission, and the loss of her greatest love.

What do you want people to take away from the book?

Before someone even reads the book, I want them to feel good about doing something meaningful because all the proceeds go to the Happy Hearts Fund (a charity Petra founded to help children affected by the tsunami and other disasters). After people read the book, I hope it gives them strength, and inspires them. We all go through difficult times in our lives, and I hope the book can give people guidance about how to get stronger.

How do you remain positive?

If you focus on the negatives it takes much longer, and it's much harder to heal.

Sometimes, it's hard to see the positives, but with time we are able to see them. The tsunami caused so much suffering, but at the same time it brought so much love between people.

Do you believe you survived the worse tsunami in history for a reason?

There must be some reason I'm still here. Of course, you question yourself, 'Why me, and why are so many thousands of others not here?' I had the angels watching after me.

How has your life changed?

I live much more in the moment now. There is a saying, 'I learn from the past, look forward to the future, and live in the present.' I enjoy every moment 100% now, because in the next moment, next second, everything can be gone.

What do you want people to know about Simon, your love?

He was such an incredibly loving person, and an inspiration. Whether it was a driver or someone in a high position, he made everyone feel special. And he made them laugh. His favorite saying was, 'A day without laughter, is a day wasted.' He also was a very caring person, and a great example for many of us.

What would you say to Simon if you could talk to him now?

There are so many things, too many things. I would rather not do it publicly. He was a very private person.

Do you have advice for other women who have lost a loved one?

The pain will probably, in some way, stay there forever. But it will decrease. We should focus on the beautiful moments, and appreciate those moments because we were lucky to have spent them with that person. [Your loved one] would want you to be happy and enjoy life, I'm sure. Simon wanted everyone to be happy, and have a joyful life. I know when I'm happy, he is smiling because he is seeing me happy.

How did it feel to go back to Thailand five months after the tsunami?

It was very difficult and heartbreaking, because I'm still very emotional. One of the most difficult things was seeing so much suffering still going on. There were children without hope. They had this blank look. The orphan children didn't know what happened to their parents. Seeing this was so heartbreaking and emotional. I was with my sister and friends; we just wanted to help, and didn't know how. After thinking about it, I realized we couldn't change the past. In a small way, we bought mattresses and food. But I wanted to do something bigger, and more for the future.

Tell CW readers about the type of work you're doing to help tsunami victims and survivors?

After I returned from Thailand, I established the Happy Hearts Fund, together with Give2Asia. We were able to provide for the building of dormitories and schools. We also are able to provide emotional programs. It's just the beginning. We just finished a charity gala dinner for the one-year anniversary of the tsunami. It reminded people that it doesn't

take one year to recover. It might take five or 10 years. The emotional recovery may take much longer.

You admit you were a workaholic, and allowed Simon to help you learn how to balance work and your personal life. How do you find balance today?

Balance is important to be able to live a happier life. [Divide] a plate or pie into sections of work, family, love, hobbies and spirituality. If there's too much on one side, then you're unbalanced. If you do a little bit of everything, then you're able to be more balanced and happier. I'm trying to do this every day. And more now than ever, I spend more time with my loved ones.

What are your goals for the future?

My main focus today is on charity. I want to be able to help children who have been affected by disasters and hardships. Modeling is like my second job for now. I've been doing work for Pantene, and also Rampage, a clothing brand. Rampage donated money to the Happy Hearts Fund, and I matched their donation. What this means is there is a merge of fashion and meaning. This year has brought opportunities for me to do more jobs with meaning.