

SARA  
ERGUSON  
ONE FOR THE  
OLIDAYS AS HER  
AUGHTERS CELEBRATE

JANIS FONDA  
HER TIGHT SKIN

BEFORE  
BIDS AN ELEGANT  
FAREWELL TO LAS VEGAS

## PETRA NEMCOVA SPEAKS EXCLUSIVELY TO 'HELLO! CANADA' ABOUT THE TRAGEDY AND LAUNCHING HER OWN

**F**or Petra Nemcova, Thailand is home to both her greatest joy and her greatest sorrow. It was there – in her favourite country, the Land of Smiles – that the now-28-year-old supermodel enjoyed a blissful Christmas holiday with her soulmate, fashion photographer Simon Atlee, three years ago. And it was there that she lost him.

The couple, who had been together for a

year and a half, was vacationing at the Khao Lak Orchid Resort in the south on Dec. 26 when the tsunami struck. Petra watched as the love of her life was swept away by the violent waves, which subsequently shattered her pelvis and left her clinging to a palm tree for eight hours before she was finally rescued.

Yet it was also in Thailand that the Czech-born beauty found healing. After recovering

from her extensive injuries, she immersed herself in work and aid for disaster survivors, launching the Happy Hearts Fund, a charity that initially served children in the tsunami-affected areas and has now expanded to other crisis-stricken regions in the world. Through the experience of starting the charity, Petra has discovered a renewed faith in humanity, and a renewed desire to devote her life to ►



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helping others.

"When you face something that painful, you have to make a decision," she says. "You can move toward the darkness, or you can move toward the light. I knew if I let myself focus on the negative, it would be a downward spiral. I chose to focus on the positive." For Petra, the positive was the tremendous kindness she witnessed during the darkest hours of her life. "It brought people together... families together, countries together, the whole world together," she says. "Everybody was asking, 'How can I help?' It created so much unconditional love.

"I saw this when I was hanging onto the palm tree. There were people coming and looking for others, completely risking their lives for strangers. That was such an incredible act of love." Petra was flown to the Czech Republic to recover, where her family helped nurse her back to health. Her pelvis was fractured in four places and her stomach distended from internal bleeding. It took five months for her to recuperate, but as soon as she was able to walk without crutches, Petra returned to Thailand with her sister and several friends.

"We wanted to see what we could do," she explains. "[Many kids] had been orphaned. They were sleeping on bare floors without anyone taking care of them. They were looking not at you, but through you. They had no hope. That was something that will stay with me forever. It was very moving. After this, you cannot sit on your butt and do nothing."

After scattering Simon's ashes in the sea, and promising him that she would get on with her life, the supermodel returned to New York City, where she lives, and began researching charities. When no charities could guarantee that 100 per cent of the funds raised would reach those in need, Petra decided to start her own charity. With board members and angel donors underwriting administration costs, every penny donated reaches youth.

Petra personally visits many Happy Hearts projects, which include schools and medical centres in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. "We opened up a school in Thailand in February," she says. "The children were so excited. About 50 kids were trying to grab my hands. They were taking me from one classroom to the other. And every time we arrived, they were jumping

Petra has a long history of philanthropy and was honoured for her efforts with a Difference Award at Toronto's One X One gala in September (opposite, bottom L, with host Matt Damon and honoree Sarah Ferguson). Following the tsunami, Petra founded a children's charity, Happy Hearts, which has projects (above and opposite, top) in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.



**'[The tsunami] brought people, families, the whole world together... It created so much unconditional love'**



up and down out of happiness. We were all jumping together. There was so much joy. "I didn't do this to be a healing process, but I think definitely it's helped," she continues. "When you help others, you may make them happy, but you make yourself happy, too ... It would be great if we didn't need these bad experiences, these reminders, to have this unconditional love in our lives every day." **H**

REPORT: TARA HENLEY