

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES**PLUSH** people

CHAPTERS OF COINCIDENCES

Three disasters and a personal tragedy in four short years haven't dampened Mark Weingard's lust for life, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

A MAN stands by the banks of the meandering Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. Engulfed in grief, he holds back his tears and slowly bends forward to place a white rose on the water's surface.

His beloved had died in a terrorist attack. Around him, family and friends do the same. Then, they take a step back and watch the flowers float away towards the ocean. Each says a silent prayer for the repose of the soul of the deceased person. The next morning, to their surprise, the white roses wash back up on the banks of the river.

"Were these flowers coming back a coincidence? Or just. I think there are forces beyond our control," says Mark Weingard about what happened in the aftermath of the loss of his girlfriend,

Annika Linden, in the Bali bombings in October 2002.

In 2003, the affable 49-year-old founded the Inspirasia Foundation which is committed to funding exceptional health, disability and education projects across Thailand, Indonesia and India. This foundation will be the recipient of revenue generated from Aziamendi 88, Malaysia's first pop-up restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur from July 22 to Oct 31.

"I think we live our lives in chapters, and that was a difficult chapter in my life," says derivatives trader-turned philanthropist Mark. This difficult chapter he's referring to includes Annika's death, but begins before that. On Sept 11, 2001 he was running late for a meeting and so escaped the bombings at the World Trade Centre in New York.

Just over a year later, on Oct 12, 2002, a terrorist bomb in Bali, Indonesia, killed 201 people, including Annika. In another two years, on Boxing Day 2004, he was in his house on Natai Beach, Phuket, Thailand when a massive earthquake created a tsunami which took the lives of more than 300,000 people and displaced millions of others. Mark survived by taking refuge on the roof of his house.

When that chapter of his life ended,

Mark opened a new one by rebuilding his home, and in the process, created Iniala Beach House. This is a unique and luxurious hotel with a charitable initiative.

CREATING LIGHT FROM DARKNESS

"If you think I had it difficult, my grandfather went through worse," says Mark. Benny Weingard saw his son (Mark's father) die in a motor vehicle accident when Mark was 10. Benny's first wife and daughter died from illness. He was also involved in World War II and saw much death in the course of performing his duty. From all these tragedies, Mark

"We need to realise how lucky we are to be alive and take what's positive."

Mark Weingard

learnt very young that life wasn't going to last forever and that "we need to realise how lucky we are to be alive and take what's positive".

Of his mother, Beryl, Mark says: "My mum and I are like chalk and cheese. It's as though I was brought in from out of space. We're so different. It doesn't mean I don't love her." It's just that all the people who have shaped the man he's become are the people Mark has met along the way. They've taught him several important lessons, with the foremost being the need to "create light from darkness".

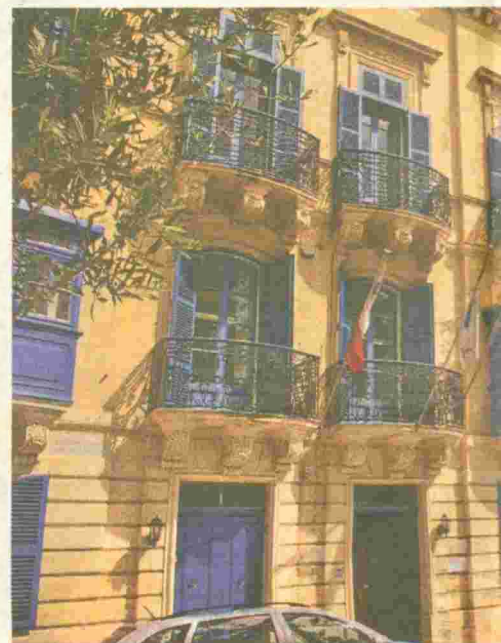
"We are never going to be everybody's favourite person," he states. "Why waste your energy on someone else's negativity?" Continuing, he says: "Let's face it, Annika died in a terrorist attack. I was in the room in Bali when the room door flew open. I said, 'Hello! Hello!' and no one answered.

"So I walked outside and the door slammed shut. There I was, in the middle of the hallway, naked except for a towel. At that moment, I started to laugh. I really felt as though Annika was playing a joke on me and telling me not to be depressed. I knew I had to do something good out of this."

TOLERANCE AND HEALING

Rejecting the very thought of revenge for the attack on Annika, the father of two boys aged 6 and 8, has observed that all over the world, there is a shift towards intolerance and fundamentalism in the last few years.

"No one can be sure if they are right," he elaborates. After all, 30 per cent of the world's population could be right because 30 per cent of the population is Christian. But about 25 per cent of the world's population is Muslim. And they believe they're right. This is all blind faith, says Mark. Brought up Jewish, there was a time be



Iniala Beach House, a unique and luxurious hotel with a charitable initiative.

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Despite the tragedy that befell him, Mark says he hasn't lost faith in humanity. Below: Houses in Malta that Mark is renovating and refurbishing.



kept kosher and still can't eat pork. That said, the former banker and trader has loosened the hold that his religious strictures have on him and admits that one doesn't need religion to teach morals. Indeed, he hasn't lost faith in humanity and deeply admires Pope Francis. "He's like a modern day Gandhi-like figure," says Mark. "He professes tolerance and acceptance. He's trying to heal. Not just his people, but others too."

LEARNING TO LIVE AGAIN

In business, with his aptitude for numbers and finance, Mark still relies on his intuition to make a decision. "If you don't trust someone from the first moment you meet them, don't go with it," he advises. "If your sixth sense is telling you something is wrong, something is wrong."

Mark says that he only began to take his education seriously when he was about 19 years old. "I knew I wanted to



Mark's mother, Beryl.



Mark's grandfather, Benny Weingard.

do something well. I didn't want to be in my 40s having done nothing."

That ambition has seen him live in places as exotic as Thailand and Singapore to ones in Europe like Switzerland and Spain.

Now, he is based in Malta, renovating and refurbishing two houses with typical Maltese balconies and magnificent facades on a quiet tree-lined street. These

houses will eventually be where he lives with his family.

Simply put, that sad chapter in his life between 2001 and 2004 changed his world and changed who he was. Having gotten into the whirlwind of work, work and more work, he became committed to doing something different and making his life rich. As he says, in conclusion: "I learnt to live again."




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