

Small wave swept away by great ocean

By Elicia Murray

Social-justice advocate Charlie Pahlman was remembered yesterday as a passionate man who loved to immerse himself in any body of water he came across.

About 500 people packed into the Abbey in Federation Square yesterday to celebrate a life cut short indulging this love.

Mr Pahlman, a 44-year-old father of two, died while snorkelling on the reef off Savai'i Island, Western Samoa, when he was hit by a wave and drowned on January 19.

The deputy director of the ACT Council of Social Service and candidate for the ACT Greens in the 2004 local election had been holidaying with his family.

A family statement, read at yesterday's service by friend and Greens colleague Roland Manderson, described the tragic circumstances.

"It was a small piece of paradise where we were staying, thatched huts, palm-fringed beaches, so warm, friendly, laid-back," he said.

Despite a high tide on the morning of his death, Mr Pahlman had commented repeatedly that he felt "so safe in these waters".

"We feel reassured that Charlie was doing something he loved in a place that felt like paradise, he couldn't have been more relaxed or content."

One of Mr Pahlman's two daughters, Kari, 12, read a poem written by her father in 1972, which included the line, "Life is a great ocean on which you are a small wave."

"When I think of him now I see a big smile and warm outstretched arms open for a hug," Kari said.

Hugs were a recurring theme, former ACTCOSS director Daniel Stubbs inviting mourners to stand and give the person next to them a "big Charlie-style whole body bear hug".

Mr Stubbs recalled his former colleague's positive attitude and his ability to bring together diverse groups of people to find common ground.

"He would sit in a room with you and there would be no one else in the universe. . . That changes lives, it changed a lot of people's lives, including my own."

The celebration of his life continued with a party at Corroboree Park Hall in Ainslie last night, which included a "global toast" at 9pm when friends around the world raised a glass to remember him.

Mr Pahlman was born in Sweden on November 22, 1960, moving to Australia with his family when he was 10. He came to Canberra in 1996 and took on the role as community organiser for Oxfam Community Aid Abroad ACT.

A keen traveller, he had previously worked with non-government organisations in Laos and Thailand for 10 years, helping local communities campaign against



WATER BABY: A love for the water ultimately led to the accidental and untimely death of Charlie Pahlman, a social-justice advocate, family man and friend to many. A giant poster and candles illuminated his memorial service yesterday. Pictures: GRAHAM TIDY

large-scale dams in the Mekong region. A memorial fund to support the region has been established in his name.

Mr Pahlman was the beloved partner of Pam Boyer, loving father of Tina, 15, and Kari, close friend of their mother Christine Pahlman, son of Anna-Lena and Ragnar, brother to Andrew and friend of many. He was cremated in a private ceremony last week. The Charlie Pahlman Memorial web site address is www.charlie.pahlman.com



POPULAR MAN: Relatives and friends attend the celebration of Mr Pahlman's life