

India's Teardrop: One U.S. Woman's Ongoing Journey to Help the Children of Sri Lanka Survive the Devastating Tsunami

Sri Lanka is an island located off the southern tip of India, home to approximately 20 million people. It is known as India's teardrop, not only for its shape, but because of the tragedy that has visited the island nation in recent years.

"This is a country that has broken my heart for so many different reasons," says Surina Piyadasa, Chief Executive Officer of Berkeley, California-based corporate media communications firm, Aurora Media Partners, and a former Wall Street investment banker. "Not only because of the devastation caused by the Asian tsunami, but because of the civil unrest, which leaves the country teetering on the brink of another civil war. Adding further insult to injury, the tsunami, which slammed the southeastern portion of the country on Boxing Day, 2004, wiped away fishing villages with 30-foot waves in a matter of seconds."

According to rough estimates, about 4,300 children on the island were identified as having one or both parents missing after that day.

Among the many organizations providing aid in the aftermath of that tragic catastrophe was the Sahanoda Foundation, a government-approved charity committed to providing care, protection and post-trauma counseling services to abandoned children living along the southern coastal belt, who have lost one or both parents as a direct result of the tsunami.

Established in 1992, Sahanoda has implemented a structured and tightly monitored program for providing care, financial support, protection and trauma counseling for these children in the safety of a nurturing home environment with loving guardians.

According to Piyadasa, Sahanoda had enrolled 650 of the "most deserving" children in its program after the tsunami hit. Among the benefits extended to them were food and lodging, clothing including footwear and school uniforms, medical attention, educational resources, grief and post-trauma psychiatric counseling.

As of December 2005, Piyadasa reports that Sahanoda had found financial sponsors for about 450 of those children.

But after personally witnessing the destruction in Sri Lanka following the tsunami, and after visiting with the children in the Sahanoda Foundation program, Piyadasa says she has made it her goal to become directly involved to help find financial sponsors for those remaining 200 children in the program.

"What makes these 200 children so special, which really grabs my heart, is, not only did they lose nearly everything in the tsunami, including their parents, they were either sexually violated or forced into domestic service by locals, not foreigners, and because of this sobering reality, these children cannot be adopted by foreigners."

She reports that since December 2005, she has found numerous financial sponsors from U.S. donors alone, willing to give US\$200 per child, per year, until the sponsored child reaches the age of 18.

"And that's just me marketing," she says, "word of mouth, meeting with people, getting doors slammed in my face."

Piyadasa says initially it was difficult to get the sponsorship program in the U.S. jumpstarted, as she was unable to offer a tax benefit to financial sponsors making donations because of strict IRS rules governing deductible charitable contributions.

"After talking to the IRS, and as you can imagine, reaching my wit's end, because it's going to cost money to set up a separate charitable foundation in the U.S., I conceived of the idea, 'well, wouldn't it make better economic sense to partner with an existing non-profit entity?'" Piyadasa says. "So that's when I started making calls to the American Red Cross, UNICEF, Emirates Airlines Foundation – you name it. I left no stone unturned."

But without having a long-standing relationship with those organizations, they were reluctant to partner with her, citing numerous other projects already on their plates.

Then Piyadasa found Riverside, California-based A Helping Hand, a designated 501(c)(3) charitable organization that was willing to host the project under its umbrella of projects, with the support of an anonymous donor.

"How cool is that?" she says. "An anonymous donor is covering all of the transaction costs. Now, I'm able to offer U.S. donors a tax advantage plus a secure online means to sponsor an orphaned child."

The financial sponsors of Sahanoda Foundation are notified in writing about the academic progress of the children they sponsor and, upon request, can receive photographs of the youth engaged in activities at school and at home. Piyadasa adds that if sponsors of these children desire to have communication through written letters or e-mail, they're able to do that as well.

"These children do not speak English, but we have volunteers interpret for them. It gives the children encouragement that there's somebody in another country that's looking out for their future and is concerned about their well-being," she says.

She also mentions that she has been looking at ways to extend the program beyond its goal of providing basic necessities. "The really exciting part is yet to come, because not only is it about giving these children a financial means to survive through the age of 18, but we are also attempting to establish a scholarship fund for the top academic performers."

According to Piyadasa, her travels to Sri Lanka in December 2005 led her to employ her investment banking networking skills in an effort to partner with a prominent bank in the country and help the children become entrepreneurs after they turn 18 years of age.

"Poverty is the underlying cause for most problems in developing countries. Following the micro credit model pioneered by Grameen Bank, this visionary Sri Lankan bank provides small-scale unsecured loans and teaches entrepreneurship to the poorest of the poor. It's an effective community outreach," she says. "The micro loans pave the way for the destitute to become self-employed."

Piyadasa says she hopes to move closer to sealing that partnership deal this December when she returns to Sri Lanka.

"It's about compassion," she says. "When you talk about love, it's about reaching out, using your skills and making a difference, because that's really the legacy that we leave behind. It's not about the deals that we do, or the possessions we accumulate in a lifetime. Those things, however gratifying at the moment, are temporal. It's about the lives we touch along the way."

If you want to contact Surina Piyadasa about the Tsunami Children's Orphan Fund, call (510) 845-4600 or e-mail her at spiyadasa@auroramediapartners.com.

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