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Surina reaches out to Sri Lanka

By *Nirmala Kannangara*

In the true spirit of Christmas, which is a time of sharing and caring for the less fortunate, it is our responsibility as a nation to commit ourselves to provide assistance to the children who have either lost one or both parents due to the tsunami catastrophe, which hit our country one year ago.

Photos (Left) Surina: Beauty comes from within (Right) In Sri Lanka: Committed to care

Surina Piyadasa, a Sri Lankan domiciled in Berkeley, California - a true daughter of the Sri Lankan soil - has voluntarily come forward to assist the less fortunate children in the tsunami-ravaged areas. Indeed, it is amazing to see young Surina, who has spent almost her entire life in the USA, dedicating herself to bring vision, hope and promise for a better tomorrow to her fellow brothers and sisters who lost parents due to the tsunami.

Surina, who is back in Sri Lanka for a holiday, has visited some areas in the Galle District in order to gain first hand experience of how these innocent children are suffering. According to the Department of Probation and Childcare Services statistics as of January 26, 2005, approximately 4,355 children on the island were identified as having one or both parents missing as a direct result of the tsunami disaster. Shortly after the natural catastrophe, which took lives and livelihoods irrespective of race, religion or social status, it is believed that most of these innocent children were forced into domestic servitude or sexually abused before government agencies were able to intervene and place them with close relatives as appointed guardians," says Surina.

Surina says, although she visited these children, she was unable to communicate directly with them due to her inability in speaking Sinhala. "I wanted to speak to them directly, but could not, as I am not familiar with my mother tongue. However, **I could witness from their innocent faces how and why they are suffering. Their eyes and body language tell me about their uncertainty in life. Even today, most of the traumatised children cannot look at the ocean without experiencing fear, grief and abandonment as a result of losing their loved ones in the tsunami's raging waves.**"

According to Surina, the Sahanoda Foundation (popularly known as Sahanoda) is a government approved charity, committed to providing care, protection and post-trauma counseling services to abandoned children living along the coastal belt, who have lost one or both parents as a direct result of the tsunami.

Established in 1992 and operating in the 22 divisional secretariats of the Kalutara, Galle, Matara and Hambantota Districts, Sahanoda has implemented a structured and tightly monitored programme for providing care, financial support, protection and trauma counseling for these children in the safety of a nurturing home environment with loving guardians.

The programme will be closely monitored, with appropriate management controls in place to assure full transparency, integrity and accurate record keeping. What makes Sahanoda's programme unique is that it transcends race, creed, religion and the social status by bringing together the children and their guardians of diverse religious, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, thereby achieving common ground.

While speaking of these innocent children, Surina who has all the comforts in life, was in tears and could not fully describe her own experience with the less fortunate while she was in Galle.

Although Surina was here during the time of the tsunami, she had made up her mind to return to Sri Lanka as soon as she could, to assist the children who were the worst affected. So back in her country of birth, she commits her precious time to collect funds for Sahanoda in order to provide a brighter future for the innocent youth.

"With regard to the Galle, Matara, Hambantota and Kalutara Districts, the most deserving 650 children have been selected for Sahanoda's programme. The benefits include food and lodging, clothing inclusive of footwear and school uniforms, medical attention, educational resources, grief and post- trauma psychiatric counseling, and much more. The financial sponsors of Sahanoda Foundation would be notified in writing about the academic progress of the children. Upon request from financial sponsors, photographs of the youth engaged in activities (at school and at home) would be sent for review.

Sponsors are also free to communicate with the recipient children on an ongoing basis," added Surina about the Sahanoda Foundation.

According to Surina, after providing for basic needs, it is proposed that a scholarship fund be established for the benefit of the top performing 100 students who achieve academic excellence.

Final selections would be determined based upon academic merit, scholastic aptitude and progress demonstrated during the initial programme. Under the scholarship fund, all of the recipients' needs relating to education (including lodging and adequate transportation), will be covered.

As a nation, it is our duty to make a positive difference in the lives of our future generations by investing in their futures today. We must act as one united family, and must not place the burden on individuals or foreign organisations to look after the welfare of these innocent members of our society.

Let us join hands together, even now, to improve the quality of life for our future generations. Surina's emotional words, thoughts and commitment to this worthy cause, would no doubt be a wake-up call to us during this Christmas season.

Financial Sponsors: to make a secure online tax-deductible payment, kindly go to <http://www.ahelpinghand.org>, click on the link "Other Projects" and refer to Tsunami Children's Fund for further instructions. This will be the second link appearing on the page.

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