

Goodbye Tsunami

A vision to action

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Located about five km off the Weligama-Akuressa highway was the historic Nuga tree of Denipitiya, which was cited in the poetry of Gajaman Nona, the well-known Poetess of Ruhuna. Despite public protests the tree was felled in February 2002 by the local authority, which gave various reasons for doing so. However a section of the tree survived.

Found in the vicinity of Weligama are historic Buddhist temples such as Gangarama, Rajakulawadana Raja Maha Vihara and Kushtarajagala. The Kapparatota Mosque is another religious landmark and a symbol of Sinhala-Muslim amity in the area.

Weligama became an independent administrative zone in 1939. The extent of the Weligama town is 2.6 square miles and the number of voters is

13,288. In 1981, the population within the Weligama Urban Council limits was 17,722 and it increased to 21,698 by 2001. Of this number 10,609 are males and 11,099 are females. The expansion of the urban population was 4,094 persons per kilometer.

The beautiful Count De Mauny's islet - also known as Galdoowa - off the coast of Weligama town is a major tourist attraction for both foreigners and locals. The castle - like magnificent mansion on the islet can be seen from the mainland. The building has unique architectural features and the specially constructed entrance to the premises is the cynosure of all eyes. The mansion's first owner was a Frenchman Count De Mauny and the islet was named after him.

Near the coastal highway facing Count De Mauny's islet is the awe-inspiring statue of a great man erected in memory of a great Philanthropist Mudaliyar David Martin Samaraweera. Born on March 10, 1855, he performed a laudable service for the development of Weligama and to uplift the living conditions of the people of the area. Among his accomplishments are Buddhist temples such as Samaraweeraramaya and schools like Siddhartha Vidyalaya. He gave the lands for these buildings and undertook their construction. Mudaliyar Samaraweera passed away on February 2, 1943.

Among his descendants who have served Weligama is his great grandson Sujith Jayawickreme, who was born in 1956 - the year in which a major socio-political transformation occurred in Sri Lanka. He, the past student of St. Thomas College Mount Lavinia is a philanthropist and a proprietary planter, who entered the field of planting when he was only 17 years old. He served as a Superintendent under the J.E.D.B. for over ten years. Having also served in a number of other state establishments, he has engaged full time in his own estate since 1988. He met his future wife Susanne, a German journalist - then working for a leading German newspaper - when she was holidaying in Kapparatota. They married in 1994 and Susanne settled down in Weligama. Susanne continues as freelance journalist, writing to several German and English language newspapers, also those in Sri Lanka.

In order to streamline their social service activity, Sujith and Susanne established the Jayawickreme Foundation in 2001. The Jayawickreme Foundation began its welfare work by helping poor rural families. At a time when all kinds of dubious organizations calling themselves were mushrooming in the country, the Jayawickreme Foundation commenced work as a charity. It has expanded its sphere from Welipitiya Divisional Secretarial Division to Weligama Divisional Secretarial Division and continues to assist poverty-stricken families.

The Foundation initiated a rural banking system, which today successfully caters to over 1,000 poor people. The Jayawickreme Foundation built 28 houses for poor families since 2002 and earlier in 2002 the Foundation began free evening English language classes for children of Charley Mount estate villages, Weligama. Today more than 270 children are attending free of charge classes in the Jayawickreme Foundation Education Centre in Denipitiya. The Foundation has also donated many Sunday school uniforms to more than 10 Sunday schools.

In 2004, Sujith and Susanne planned to celebrate Christmas at the Yala Safari Hotel, where they had been celebrating Christmas on December 24-25 every year since 1994, the year they married. It was part of their annual programme. So as usual they went to Yala Safari the manager of which, Upali Weerasinghe, had become a friend of theirs over the years. Most tourists who visited Yala National

Park stayed overnight at this well-known hotel in the park, which faced the sea. Towards the end of December, this hotel is usually packed with tourists. But upon visiting the hotel in December 2004 Sujith and Susanne were surprised to find that unlike in the past there were no special items added to the place to mark Christmas - not even a Christmas tree. When they asked Manager Weerasinghe for the reason his reply was that he did not feel like having anything special for Christmas that year. The couple was even more disappointed when the manager said that he could not provide them with any accommodation since the hotel was full. There was no alternative for Sujith and Susanne but to leave the place after wishing all those who were there a merry Christmas. It was the first time in 10 years that the couple did not have the opportunity of celebrating the event at Yala Safari. The two of them however promised to return to the hotel in March 2005. So Sujith and Susanne spent December 24-25, 2004 at a Tissamaharama hotel and prepared to return home the following day - Dec. 26 - around 8.00 a.m. While Susanne was packing the bags Sujith went to cashier's counter to settle the bills, when his attention was drawn to the nearby TV set that was showing an international cricket encounter in which Sri Lanka was participating. Delaying the payment of bills for a few minutes, he sat there to watch the match. While seated there he noticed that a safari jeep that had gone to the Yala National Park returning to the rest house at break-neck speed. When the vehicle came to a halt, Sujith found that the driver was so terrified that he was finding it difficult to speak. At last he was able to explain what happened. "Sir, we were at Yala when a gigantic wave came from the sea. Everything was destroyed. Only the water tank of Yala Safari remains. We turned our vehicles back and drove so fast that we do not know the speed at which we returned until we stopped here. Everyone there is dead. Sir, I cannot understand what happened."

Realizing that sea waves had caused a massive disaster, Sujith prepared to leave immediately after settling the bills. Meanwhile he came to know that the sea had devastated the entire southern coast. Although the couple first thought of rushing back to their hometown of Weligama, they could not bring themselves to do so when they remembered the number of local and foreign guests to whom they had wished a merry Christmas at Yala Safari. So they went instead to the Debarawewa government hospital where they found the bodies of a large number of victims, children, adults and even some of their friends, and also came across survivors who were being medically treated. Immediately Sujith and Susanne went about helping them and providing required items. They also informed about the foreign victims to the German Embassy, which in turn could convey the message to the relevant foreign missions. Having spent the whole of December 26 at Tissamaharama, the two of them set off for Weligama, the following day.

Since the coastal highway via Hambantota - Tangalle was blocked they were compelled to travel via Thanamalwila - Sooriyawewa while realizing that the two of them had been unexpectedly saved twice from a tragic end, perhaps because they had done no wrong to others but helped them. The first instance of this miraculous escape was that no accommodation was available for them at the Yala Safari Hotel. The second was that they had decided to stay back at Tissamaharama to help victims instead of rushing back to Weligama along the coast on the morning of December 26th.

After reaching Weligama on December 27th Sujith and Susanne saw the destruction caused to life and property in their

hometown. There was neither telecommunication nor power supply. Sujith highly commended the emergency services that the Sri Lanka Air Force and other units of the armed forces performed in their hour of disaster.

Since the National Disaster Management Centre was only collecting and distributing day-to-day needs of the surviving tsunami victims, it had not worked out any specific assistance programme. Hence the Centre was directing individuals and organizations that were ready to assist to the nearest Divisional Secretaries.

The whole of Weligama had turned into

a funeral house, since it was the second worst tsunami-hit area in the Matara District. The number of dead in the village of Pelena, Weligama was 133. Nineteen of them were Pelena North Grama Niladhari Division, 71 from Pelena South GN Division and 43 from Pelena West GN Division. In addition to Pelena, loss of many lives and destruction to property were reported from other areas. Although 25 camps were set up for those whom the tsunami had rendered homeless, initially they had not even clothes to wear. In view of this the Jayawickreme Foundation decided to take immediate relief measures to restore normalcy to the area as far as possible. The first step was the quick distribution of food items the Jayawickreme Foundation purchased from nearby grocery shops. Around the same time the Foundation was able to distribute clothing to the surviving victims with the generous contributions that Sujith and Susan's friends in the garment industry made. As a long-term measure the Jayawickreme Foundation also took steps under the guidance of the Weligama Divisional Secretary Benefits Beyond Boundaries

Jayawickrema Foundation

to provide houses for those who were rendered homeless. By now 19 Tsunami houses have been completed in the Weligama AGA Division. Many more are expected.

Fifty-five-year-old Wengappuli Arachchige Dionel, is one of the recipients who were provided with houses by the Jayawickreme Foundation. He is now residing with his family in his new home at No.49/18A, Gangarama Road, Pelena. Living with him are his wife Somawathie(45) and daughters Sandamali Nadeeka(25), Chathurika Nadeeshani(23), Wasanthi Chaturani(19) and Chethika Shasendrani (11) who is a year six student at the Dharmapala Model Junior School.

They are still fearful when recalling their

miraculous escape from the tsunami. On that fateful day

Dionel had gone to Weligama town leaving his wife Somwathie and daughters at home. When the tidal waves struck, the mother and daughters had embraced each other and ran to safety in the nick of time. It was their luck that they all stayed together. But they

could not save their house, furniture or anything else in it. Their next move was to rush to Weligama town to look for Dionel who had saved his life by climbing the hill near the Weligama railway station. The emotional scene, when his wife and daughters found him cannot be described in words. Their only possessions were the clothes they wore. They spent that night at the displaced people's camp at the Welihinda Temple and later spent several days at camps at the Denipitiya and the Polwatte Junior schools.

All they were thinking at the time was building a new home.

But Dionel did not have any land of his own to do so. Then a young woman in their village who was employed abroad purchased a block of land for them with her money. It is on this six-perch block

the family is now residing. Dionel built the foundation of the new house with state assistance but had no cash to go any further. It is then that the Jayawickreme Foundation came to his assistance. He remembers with gratitude Sujith and Susanne and the Venerable Pelvehera Susima who coordinated the work on building his new home, which has a space of over 500 square feet. It is now a complete house, which has also been supplied. Although Dionel has been a mason he is now seldom engaged in it as a result of an eye surgery he underwent. It is his daughters who are now engaged in helping the family. His elder daughter, Sandamali Nadeeka currently employed in a garment factory, shoulders a major part of this responsibility. Many were those who lost their lives or their loved ones in the tsunami.

Among those who faced this tragedy is a fisherman, Lokuliyana Shirley Sanath Mendis(30) of 71B, Gangarama Road, Pelena, Weligama. His wife is Nalika Sudarshini(28) and their two children are Nimesh(6) and Lasith(2). The tsunami claimed the lives of seven of Shirley's close relatives who were living in their ancestral home. They were his parents - father Ariyadasa Mendis(73), mother Anulawathie de Silva(62) - elder brother Ajith (38), younger sister Chamila Jayanthi(28), Ajith's son Lahiru, Shirley's elder sister Shirani Damayanthi's son Priyankara and Chamila Jayanthi's one-year-old daughter Piyumi Tharaka.

At the time the tidal waves hit Weligama,

Shirani Damayanthi was about to give birth to her second child. When she began experiencing labour pains at home on Dec. 26th morning her husband went to meet the doctor and thereafter fetch a vehicle to rush her to hospital. As the tsunami struck she was swept out of a window of her house. This however saved her life and that of the baby in the womb but her son, Priyankara, was not so fortunate. Damayanthi's husband escaped death because he had gone to meet the doctor. On the same day she gave birth to her second child (a boy) who was named after the son who died in the tsunami. Shirley believes that it was the newborn child's luck that his mother's life was saved after being swept out of the window.

The unbelievable tragedy of losing a number of relatives in one single moment had left Shirley utterly shocked and dazed. It was at this moment that the Venerable Pelvehera Susima had come to his help and obtained the Jayawickreme Foundation's assistance in building a new home for Shirley's family. But to build a house a secure block of land was necessary. However he managed to solve the problem by getting apart of the land that belonged to his parents. So with the foundation's help they were able to complete the house and move into their new home by February 4, 2006. According to his wife Nalika, although at times, Shirley earned a considerable income from fishing, the idea of building a new house had never occurred to them, until the tsunami struck. It had remained a dream, until Sujith Jayawickreme came to their assistance and encouraged them to start their lives afresh. It is the Jayawickreme Foundation that has provided them with a complete house.

The Jayawickreme Foundation came forward not only to provide houses but also to give a helping hand to people to make a living. The Leela Lace Institute located at No. 169, Paranakade, Weligama, is one such example. The owner of this establishment (registered No. 3699) is Christombu Baduge Leelaseeli(60) who learnt lace making from her parents. It is now 30 years since she began Leela Lace Institute, which is popular among both local and foreign tourists. The institute's two main activities are

teaching lace making and selling finished products. Leelaseeli's work earned her the 2003 Viskam Ransilu Award presented by the National Crafts Council. She and her husband P.H. Sangadasa (63) - a retired excise inspector - were the parents of three children. The eldest is a son Jagath Priyadarshana(33). The two daughters are Nadeeka Priyadarshani(30) and Sriyanjani Priyadarshani(28). Their house and workshop faced the sea, which was nothing strange to Leelaseeli and her employees. On the morning of December 26, Leelaseeli, her husband Sangadasa, other family members and employees were at the Leela Lace Institute. Although Sangadasa was invited to breakfast he was not feeling hungry at the time.

Suddenly they saw the sea waves rising.

incessantly. But at first it caused them no alarm since turbulence in the sea was a familiar sight to them. But everything changed the next moment. The waves rose to a height of 12 feet, twisting trees and were fast heading towards them. They had no time to run for safety and were caught in the waves. According to Leelaseeli, her husband fell headlong. She saved herself by clinging on to a grill above a window of their house. When the water receded, she found that everything was lost. Not only her home and workshop but also 11 other houses were destroyed. When they found her husband, he was dead.

A total of 183 people in the Paranakade area had died in the tsunami. At least one person in each household was dead. In a house neighbouring Leela Institute, all six occupants had died. Leelaseeli was at loss in deciding her future. It was then that Jayawickrema Foundation came to her assistance and gave the necessary financial backing to re-start her lace making business. Assisting in her work today are two women - Shiromi(33) and Dayawathie(50).

Since December 26, 2004 was Poya day Buddhist temples were crowded with devotees. At Gangarama, Pelena, there were many people observing 'ata sil' (the eight precepts).

The first Chief Incumbent of the **Gangaramaya, which was built in 1823,** was the Venerable Ilwatte Piyarathana.

His successor was all dedicated to Buddhist revival in the area and the Gangarama became a hive of religious activity over the years. Among the resident bhikkus in this temple were the Venerable Wattakkgodha Aththarama (who wrote many books on the philosophy of Abhidamma in Buddhism) and the Venerable Pelene Wajiragnana who did an immense service to the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. In later years, the well-known Venerable Madihe Pannaseeha and the Ven. Weligama Gnanarathana received their higher ordination at this temple.

On that fateful day there were seven bhikkus in the temple, including the Chief Incumbent, the Ven. Pelvehera Susima, two novice monks and two bhikkus who had come from other temples. They had participated in a pirith ceremony in a house in the area. While the devotees were having their morning meal, they noticed that the Polathu river that flows past the temple, changing its course.

The next moment a huge column of water swept into the temple premises, drowning the devotees - epitomizing life's impermanency as preached by the Buddha.

he force of incoming lashing water also shattered the 12 feet high-wall in the temple premises with a deafening sound. The waves swept back a motor vehicle that was frantically trying to leave the place,

making the car float towards the Gangarama. Meanwhile, the temple's Chief Incumbent, Ven. Pelvehera Susima was making valiant effort to save the drowning devotees. He recalls with joy how he succeeded in rescuing some of them by pushing them towards high ground near the temple 's stupa as the waters of the Polauthu River continued to rise. In the process the bhikku too was nearly drowned but managed to survive by reaching dry land near the Polwatte temple before he left for the Welihinda Temple to arrange relief for the surviving victims. Upon returning to Gangaramaya it was a great shock for the Ven. Susima to see that a large number of ola leaf books had been lost in the tsunami. Of the 60 books that were in the temple only 21 now remain. It was irreparable loss. The buildings in the temple's vicinity too were damaged and fresh plans had to be drawn up to rebuild the place. It was then that the Jayawickreme Foundation came to assist the Gangaramaya where steps were taken to build a kindergarten and Sunday School for 550 children community hall in the shortest possible time. This awe inspiring three-story building is 77 feet long and 34 feet wide. Under the leadership of Sujith and Susanne and under the guidance of the Ven. Susima, they were able to accomplish many a noble task in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami.

The disaster had dashed the hopes of youth in the area. Depressed over the loss of their loved ones some of the young people had become vulnerable to undesirable temptations. To deal with this problem, the Jayawickreme Foundation worked out a special programme for young men and women in Weligama to direct them towards sports activities. In this connection sports goods were provided to 30 youth clubs affiliated to the Weligama Yawwana Samaja Pradeshiya Bala Mandalaya.

Among those who benefited under this programme is Kasun Pushpaka(20) of Thalaramba, Kamburugamuwa whose family was rendered homeless as a result of the tsunami. Although more than one year has passed since the disaster, his parents are still living in a camp for the tsunami displaced at Thambilihenawatte. A past pupil of Sri Indusdaara Vidyalaya, Thalaramba, he is now making use of these sports items to engage in sports activity, every evening.

Joining him are his parents, Sister Bhashini Pushpika(8) and other young people in the area.

Another beneficiary is Hewa Paththinige Shammi (22), who is the President of the Negena Tharu, Youth Club in Thalaramba. Shammi, who has studied up to GCE A-levels in commerce, is now giving leadership in sports activities to young people in Kahatagahawatte, Thalaramba. Gemunu Sanjaya(20), Ruwin Rajith(16), Rumesa Samarajeewa(19) and Ravindra Nishantha(26) are among the youth who engage in bodybuilding exercises at her residence. Altogether over 20 young people participate in these exercises daily.

Menaka Priyadarshana(28) of Madurudoowa, Bandaramulla in Mirissa is the President of Yawwana Pradeshiya Balamandalaya and Chief Organizer of the Nawoda Youth Club. He gives leadership to 30 youth clubs and directs young people to various activities under the guidance of the Weligama Youth Services Officer. These activities have been made possible by the Jayawickreme Foundation's donation of sports kits worth more than two million Rupees to all youth clubs in the Tsunami affected areas. Each kit comprises five body building instruments and bats and balls required for cricket, football and volleyball.

Among the services the Jayawickreme Foundation provided are the provision of mechanized boats to fishermen and the establishment of a free of charge multi religious day care centre for 40 old people in Pelena. The government has given the foundation a 1.2 acre-land for the construction of houses for Tsunami displaced families.

The Jayawickreme Foundation's vision is hope and goal is helping the needy. The Foundation's performance in Weligama testifies to this fact.



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