

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and social enterprises

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food and give it to them."**
An exclusive interview with
Dr. Chef Damodaran

From the Editor

Dear Friend,

Life without happiness is like dwelling in 'black and white', absolutely mundane and lifeless. Even if you happen to be a crorepathi, or a celebrity, or have accomplished all your aspirations—what does it matter if you are unhappy? There is a saying, "Some people are so poor, all they have is money."

You really won't attain lasting pleasure and satisfaction in your life and be content in your achievements unless you are grounded in reality and happiness. And, this arrives from who you are, what you do, the relationships you build, and how you choose to nourish your own uniqueness that lies within.

People can try to pursue several things in their life, but the ONE thing that really matters is the pursuit of happiness and the utmost solace is to understand that there is no destination, it is only a journey!

Conversations Today has featured several changemakers to inspire and influence you to be happier than before. We are sure that the lives of these people will hold you in a joyous state of mind.

Happy reading!

Marie Banu

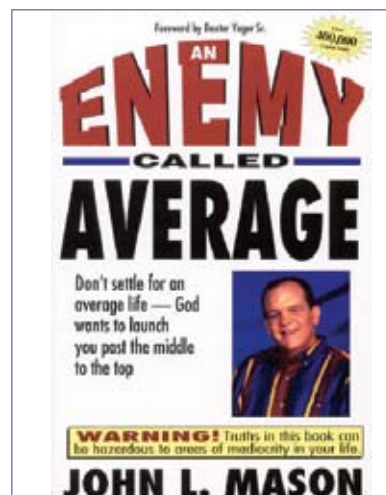
An Enemy Called Average

All successful people are faithful in the small things. There is power in taking small steps.

Many people are not moving forward today simply because they were not willing to take the small step placed before them. If you have a dream to go into any particular area, you should leap at the opportunity—no matter how small—to move in the direction of your dream. For example: if you dream of being a college basketball coach and are sitting at home waiting for an invitation from Roy Williams at North Carolina University, you should know that call will never come. You need to find an opportunity to coach somewhere, anywhere. Find a young person, a young team. Jump in and coach with all of your heart, like you would if you were coaching at the highest level.

Don't be afraid to take small steps. There's something powerful about momentum...no matter how small. Many times the impossible is simply the untried.

I can remember a time in my life



when I was immobilized with fear, consumed with what I was supposed to do. It seemed so huge a task; I was unable to bring myself to face it. A friend came to me and spoke two words that broke that paralysis in my life. He said, "Do something!" I'll never forget that day...taking some small, seemingly insignificant steps. Momentum began to come into my life.

If you are at a point of paralysis in

your life because of what you feel you're supposed to do, the words today are, "Do something!" Don't worry about the long-term goal right now; just take the steps that take you past the starting point. Soon you'll get to a point of no return. As you climb higher, you'll be able to see much farther.

As you begin, don't be afraid. Eric Hoffer said, "Fear of becoming a 'has-been' keeps some people from becoming anything." Every great idea is impossible from where you are starting today. But little goals add up, and they add up rapidly. Most people don't succeed because they are too afraid to even try. As incredible as it sounds, they decide in advance they're going to fail.

Many times the final goal seems so unreachable we don't even make an effort. But once you've made your decision and have started, it's like you're halfway there. Start—no matter what your circumstances. Take that first step!

It's simple. Grow wherever you are planted.

—An excerpt from *An Enemy Called Average* by John Mason

ADD SPARKLE TO THE SEASON WITH A
TOUCH OF THE ORIENT AT **China Town**
A SIP OF SCINTILLATING SPAIN AT **Zara**
A TINGE OF EXOTIC THAILAND AT **Benjarong**
A MESMERISING SENSE OF NORTH INDIA
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Photos: Divya Karthikeyan



Dancer In The Dark

Just like a bright flame that sways in a room filled with darkness, dancer and social entrepreneur Ponni's life is dedicated to throwing light on a cause that many in a world of ignorance, shun and show indifference to. Illuminating various causes affecting the transgender community through the medium of dance is her mission.

A love for Bhartanatyam at a young age spurred Ponni to launch Abhinaya Nrithyalaya, a dance school in Vyasarpadi. With over 30 students currently enrolled at the school, Ponni and her troupe have performed throughout the state and at major metropolitan cities, even winning honours and accolades. Recalling her passion for the art at the age of 13, her admittance to a dance class in her hometown Thoothukudi was far from easy, if not for a fellow transgender individual who spotted her eagerness and aided her. "At that moment, I knew I wanted to teach children who wanted to learn the art as much as I did, but didn't have the opportunities around them to." After completing a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics, she went on to earn her diploma in Bhartanatyam and began training 20 interested students at Theni, who also happened to be from the transgender community.

"A little apprehension was present because of whether the students would accept me, but they were so welcoming of me and they saw me as an artist and not as a transgender." The dance workshop in Theni is also where Ponni met Anjali, a fellow dancer and co-founder of the dance school. "I also felt a need to brush up on my skills in order to kickstart the idea of

opening the school, and the diploma from CSIM helped me see an entrepreneurial side of me that I never thought I had." She credits her knowledge of basic documentation skills, time management and her ability to communicate as the prime reasons for who she is today. As for her performances, the urge to work towards bringing about a social change predominated. "Starting out with 10 transgenders, I addressed social issues such as dowry, female infanticide. We were also probably the first to address the

what carry one through life's ordeals—not gender, sex, or status.

To her surprise, the Tamil Nadu Industrial Investment Corporation came forward with a loan to help her launch the school and everything gradually fell into place. Other issues that still stand in the way are the mindsets of parents whose children are eager to join her class. "Some never come back; some ask me a lot of questions—there is still an air of hesitation and apprehension. I give them the benefit of the doubt by asking them to observe my

and shifting the idea of 'transgender' as a primary identity.

Horror stories of forced sex-work are still recurrent and Ponni feels it is her responsibility to make sure that the community is known for so much more than just their hurdles. "Not only will healthy attitudes of society and family help their inter-personal relationships, but also steer them in the right direction where they can go on to become empowered individuals. Some families have embraced their children for who they are, some have still yet a long way to go, but we received a startlingly heartfelt response for '*Netru Indru Naalai*' with audience members hugging their parents and reminiscing on the abuse and anger they faced. At the end of an emotionally-charged performance, all that remained was forgiveness and acceptance - just like the calm after a storm."

Opening more dance schools and performing at many more venues are currently on the agenda. The school's existence has also drastically improved the surrounding neighbourhood's idea of the transgender community. However, Ponni feels the current government needs to be more co-operative and encouraging of schemes to help the transgendered community as a whole. "We also help fellow transgenders get voter ID cards and spread as much awareness as we can of schemes that can help them empower themselves. Just as any other citizen, we have the right to vote and own land and the government can really help further our cause by implementing more schemes and laws that work to our favour."

—Divya Karthikeyan

"I also felt a need to brush up on my skills in order to kickstart the idea of opening the school, and the diploma from CSIM helped me see an entrepreneurial side of me that I never thought I had."

problems faced by transgenders in society through a timeline-based performance called '*Netru Indu Naalai*'. Though we are transgenders to the rest of the world, we see ourselves as women performers with a mission to educate and entertain."

Ponni recounts her toughest battle to be acquiring land for her school. "The way they stare down at you and disarm you with their gaze feels like a stab in your soul. It's demeaning and hurtful, but I realised that for all the good work that I want to do, I had to be stronger than that." A staunch belief in the strength of character and passion for work, she believes that in the end, those qualities are

class, and patiently answer all their questions. Patience and not anger is what will help destroy preconceived notions about any community that has been misunderstood by society."

Radiating optimism, she exclaims, "We are getting many queries on classes and performances and we're overjoyed by how easily people are welcoming our initiative." Citing this openness a wonderful improvement from the reception to the community 10 years ago, Ponni says that the school's public performances have emphasised on the importance of parents accepting a transgendered child for what he or she is,

From Mother to Daughter – PRERANA

It is not very often that we come across a person whose thoughts and enthusiasm does not comply with their age. At 56 years, Prashantha Jois, Founder of Prerana Resource Centre comes across as one. A psychology graduate from a town called Sagar in Karnataka, she is a devotee of Swami Vivekananda and an ardent believer of his philosophy of '*jeeva shiva seva*' (meaning – service to the needy). After marriage in 1984, she became a member of an 18 member family. "My family life taught me the redolence of human relationships," she says.

Her schedule in the new family gave her the space and time to ensconce in her meditation. "The women in the house used to finish all the household work by 8:30 AM. The rest of the day was mostly a time for introspection and search for that one thing I found missing," Prashantha explains. One day, during her meditation, she found herself engrossed in thoughts of rehabilitating the disabled, especially the blind. "That moment, I owed to rehabilitate at least 12 visually challenged girls in my life," says Prashantha, who is all perked up now, in sharing her experiences from the past.

Her mission began soon. She visited neighboring villages at her relatives' place near Meerut. Observed how challenged individuals were treated. "It was the most painful part. I saw blind girls being treated like animals. With poverty restricting them from treating their ailment, these children were seen as a burden to the families. No one realized that their other organs were functioning to the optimum," she shares.

Totally convinced about her mission in life, she communicated her interest to the family members who also got convinced about the role she wanted to play in the lives of the disabled. With support from her family she set off to rehabilitate the differently abled. She sold all her jewellery and started a rehabilitation centre for the visually impaired orphaned adolescent girls, in a rented building.

Prerana Resource Centre (PRC) was thus born in 1992 with 12 inmates. It aimed at providing a holistic rehabilitation that took care of food, accommodation, mobility aids, training in multiple trades and then mainstreaming them in the society. Prashantha took the effort in observing trades in the industries and trained the girls in the centre. She blind folded herself and worked in four factories for six months to prove that visually impaired people can work as normal as anybody else.

The number of inmates grew to 35 girls in just 4 years of its establishment. The girls were trained in self-grooming, home management, mobility, etc. "They were happy with my affection for them and began to feel important and confident. Their satisfaction evinced that I was on the right path. Thanks to Swami



Vivekananda's books that always accompanied and directed me," Prashantha adds.

Prashantha's name was soon synonymous with PRC. The girls here lived like a family, mutually sharing all the responsibilities in administering the centre. "We have batches for washing, cooking, cleaning, vegetable cutting—all of us share the work." It is interesting to see a visually impaired girl help a handicapped girl and vice versa. The culture of helping others with one's strengths is imbibed as a habit here.

Prerana's achievements are many. It has placed 315 visually challenged girls in jobs and facilitated the process of getting disability ID cards for 915 members. Prashantha has also organized marriages for 22 girls at the centre, 4 of whom have children now. "I have grown to be a grandmother," she laughs out. Today, the centre houses 120 girls with different impairment who are trained in basket weaving, and making telephone mats, garlands and paper bags. The centre that has registered around 1500 inmates today stands in its own building that is equipped to rehabilitate 90 members. Prashantha has collected 52 lakh rupees from philanthropists and donors to establish this facility.

Prashantha's work has received accolades from several forums. PRC received the National Award for Placement Services in the year 2005 from Government of India; Government of Karnataka honoured her with the State Award for Best Service to the Disabled, in 2006. Prashantha is also the



"It is interesting to see a visually impaired girl help a handicapped girl and vice versa. The culture of helping others with one's strengths is imbibed as a habit here."

recipient of Kittur Rani Chennamma Award for Best Social Service (2006) and State Award from the Department of Welfare of the Disabled (2007) from the Government of Karnataka. She was the recipient of Sadguru Gnanananda

Award 2007 for her exemplary work. This award was instituted by Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani in Chennai. So far, over 75 organisations have honoured her with felicitations.

With her health becoming a concern after she met with an accident, PRC had to face the challenge of missing her personal presence. "The main problem now is maintenance. My mobility is limited ever since I fell down and had a fracture," says a concerned Prashantha. She admits that bringing in girls to the centre was not a challenge, but maintaining this work certainly is. Her daughter who was working with Robert Bosch has now taken to her shoes upon request.

When questioned about her satisfaction in the reach of Prerana, she recounts "All those who called me a mad lady as I was trying to rehabilitate the visually impaired saw my work and started supporting me in different ways." That says it all!

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Kshitij Mehra – Showing The Path To Young Minds

It takes courage to be a shining beacon for others. Especially for young and influential minds. However, it is a responsibility few take on, so that there is some kind of guidance available for children to make those tough career choices at the crucial time in life. Meet Kshitij Mehra, one such shining beacon, spreading awareness in the hills of Himachal at present.

Sometimes every effort goes in vain and sometimes a little push is all that you need to change people's lives. And when it comes to being a guide for children, the more you indulge with them, the healthier the relation gets. As is often said, children are like clay, the way you mould them, that is the shape they take. Hence it is important to note how the children are being taught in school and how well their mentors and pedagogues are guiding them. There was a time when there were very few career prospects that children were aware of. But nowadays, many new professions have come up which were earlier thought of as hobbies only.

Rural India is still unaware of these prospects. All they know is a typical list of 4-5 career options and that's it. But there are people like Kshitij Mehra who want to leave no stone unturned in making children aware of better future prospects for them. And why not? These children are the future of India.

Kshitij is the founder of 'Yuvshaala', an organization that solely works in spreading awareness about career prospects for children, guiding and counseling them for a better future. Seeing that villages are the ones most deprived of such knowledge, their prime focus became villages initially. So it was very important to reach such places and let children and parents know the different opportunities available to them, and how they could use their skills in a professional way. When he first started this venture, he just had one motto in his mind, "If I am able to change the life of at least one child, it would be the biggest achievement for me!"



Kshitij conducting a session on giving an insight to the students on Career opportunities (Photo Courtesy: Yuvshaala)

The beginning:

Kshitij was travelling to Himachal to conduct a session for an organization he was working for at that time. It was here that he realized the fact that people in such areas are not aware of things that the city people are exposed to. He determined at that time that, sooner or later, he will reach these people with a motive of giving them an insight of how the world is full of unseen opportunities for them. Thus Yuvshaala was formed.

At the beginning of any venture, it is important to find a proper way for funds to come in. Kshitij and his team were against the idea of getting funds in charity. So they did things differently. Since Kshitij himself had some knowledge about finance and knew about the budget and capital, he and his team calculated that if they collect even Rs. 10 from each student who attended the session, it was easy for them to proceed with their idea of guiding the children. The fee is never forced upon them, he

said. It's their free will to pay or not.

The first year was totally dedicated to Himachal Pradesh Government schools, in the second year they focused on private schools as well. The current scenario is such that they have established their roots amongst the colleges as well.

What is so different that they do?

Kshitij and his team follow a four-step process called MARG:

- Aptitude Training
- Personality development
- Behavior understanding and Development
- Personality and Ethic Development

They first introduce the team to the class – tell them about who they are and what the organization does. It's an interactive session, wherein the team and the children get to mingle with each other and open up their minds to each

other. They believe it's very important to know the mind of the child, what learning capabilities the child possesses, his/her linguistic skills, interpersonal skills, etc. After these things are known they conduct a psychometric test.

Once the result of the test is out, the children are divided into groups of the same genre. This is just to make them feel comfortable, but they are not forced to. It's a 3-4 hour workshop, wherein interaction is the key and focus is on interpersonal communication.

In the coming 5 years, Kshitij sees Yuvshaala reaching the depths Punjab, Himachal and Haryana. They are presently working on the schools of Kullu, as he thinks that the children there are open to new ideas and new professions.

Becoming a support line for students is the vision of Yuvshaala, that too in such a manner that they are employable by the time they complete their education. Kshitij's contribution in making India a better country is to focus on the education sector. He feels that putting in tons of money in education sector is not the solution for improving quality in education, but the implementation of plans and schemes is what should be focused upon. Better training of the teachers is a must.

Being young and so energetic, a sparkle can be seen in his eyes when he talks about children, education and spreading awareness among them. Yuvshaala was formed in 2010, and the kind of efforts he has put in the past 3 years is worth applauding. His success is a result of pure determination and a fire within him to do something for the children and the society. Yuvshaala has a bright future and a lot is yet to be seen from this young enthusiast.

—Neha Ralli

This article first appeared in The Better India, and has been republished here with permission. The Better India is an online platform that showcases little-known positive initiatives about India, and helps shift focus towards positive journalism.



Kshitij with his students (Photo Courtesy: Yuvshaala)

Tale of Twin Sisters

Apollo MedSkills is a national skilling and social initiative vertical of Apollo Hospital. They offer one-year diploma courses for Paramedicals and encourage students from rural and economically poor backgrounds to enroll.



Photos: Marie Banu



Murthy heads the Apollo MedSkills Skill Development Centre at Annanagar in Chennai which is the National Skilling vertical of Apollo group. “This is a Joint Venture with National Skills Development Corporation which comes under the Central Government of India. Students belonging to below the poverty line are enrolled for the paramedical courses through NGOs. There is a huge scope for professionals in the health care industry. The government school students are encouraged to pursue this course as there is immediate placement offered by Apollo MedSkills,” he says.

Apollo College of Nursing at Ayanambakkam and Apollo Institute of Management Studies also enrolls students from rural areas and city slums. Admission for the next batch for Paramedicals at Apollo MedSkills is on.

For more information, please contact Murthy Nanjan at 044-26151664/+91-8144432030 or write to murthy_n@apolloedmedskills.com. www.apolloedmedskills.com.

“The Paramedical course is much better than BA or BSc. In a year’s time we get qualified to work in a hospital and we are assured of placement at Apollo Hospital.”



As I entered Apollo MedSkills at Annanagar in Chennai, I noticed Kanmani and Karthika connecting a handsfree to their mobile phone. They plugged one earpiece in each of their ears and began to chat quietly. I was curious to know if they were listening to music, or speaking to someone else over phone. Sensing my presence, they came towards me and enquired. “Hello Ma’am! Whom would you like to meet?”

“I have come to write a story about Apollo MedSkills. Can I please meet your coordinator?” I asked.

“Story?” reiterated the twin sisters and went to call Murthy, the Centre Incharge.

Murthy received me warmly and introduced me to his staff and students. I asked if I can converse with Kanmani and Karthika, who caught my eye, and he agreed.

“It is always amazing to see twins. And you both are lovely,” I initiated the conversation.

Kanmani and Karthika exchanged a shy smile.

To put them at ease, I started clicking their pictures. “Can you show it to me?” “Can we get a copy of the pictures?” asked the twins spontaneously.

“I will, if you spend some time talking to me about yourselves,” I bartered politely.

They willingly agreed and we sat together to chatter.

Kanmani and Karthika’s parents Karuppasamy and Natchiyar are weavers at Virudhunagar. With the power cuts predominant in the rural areas, their power loom did not fetch them enough money.

Last June, Kanmani gained admission in BSc Mathematics, while Karthika awaited her admission in a Medical college. Karuppasamy tried to persuade Karthika to join the weaving trade, but she was determined to pursue her education. It was at this time they saw the advertisement about Apollo MedSkills courses in a

regional paper. Both moved into a hostel in Chennai and are now undergoing the specialized course in Radiology & Imaging Technology at Apollo MedSkills.

“We both wanted to stay together wherever we were. This is why we joined the Paramedical course at Apollo last year,” said Kanmani adding that, “My parents were happy to know that in a year’s time we would be provided an employment at Apollo Hospital. Given my family’s financial situation this was the best option we could choose.”

Apollo MedSkills is a national skilling and social initiative vertical of Apollo Hospital. They offer one-year diploma courses for Paramedicals and encourage students from rural and economically poor backgrounds to enroll. Students who have secured 50 percent marks or above in their twelfth standard examination are eligible to join the Paramedical course. Specialisation is offered in Medical

Lab Technology, Radiology & Imaging Technology, Cardiac Non Invasive Technology, Operation Theatre Technology, and Dialysis Technology; and a six-month internship at Apollo Hospital is provided. Once the students successfully complete their internship programme, they are offered placement at Apollo Hospital and other hospitals of repute.

“Do you miss living with your parents? How often do you visit them?” I asked concernedly.

“This is the first time we have been separated from our parents. But, we have got used living in a hostel now. When we miss our parents we give them a missed call. They would call back and speak with us. We are able to visit them only once in six months,” said Karthika heaving a sigh.

“So, were you speaking to your parents when I first came in?” I asked.

“Yes!” they replied in chorus.

I reckoned that this was why they had one handsfree connected to their mobile so that they both can listen and speak to their parents at the same time.

Kanmani and Karthika though best friends confess that they do share fights in common. Their only recreation is talking a walk down the neighbourhood. “We receive a monthly pocket money of five hundred rupees each, and we hardly spend that money,” said Kanmani responsibly.

The twins took me around the campus and led me to their classroom where over 22 students undergoing the Paramedical course were seated.

The boys and girls were competing to draw my attention and I enjoyed every moment interacting with them. 16 of them came from Kancheepuram, Vellore, and Virudhunagar districts, while the rest were from Chennai.

“Are you happy to pursue this course? Why did you not

choose to study BA or BSc?” I asked.

“The Paramedical course is much better than BA or BSc. In a year’s time we get qualified to work in a hospital and we are assured of placement through Apollo MedSkills. We can start earning sooner,” said a proud Vicky.

“My family can’t wait for three or four years for me to contribute to the household income. My father is being treated for cancer and I need to support him,” said Latha.

“Studying at Apollo MedSkills gives me a lot of pride. We have the best faculty and we are also taught spoken English and computer skills,” said Karthik.

After listening to their prompt responses and exchanging jokes, I bid adieu to the young buds that were waiting for their turn to blossom.

—Marie Banu

Through sports, Mathew Spacie found a means to reach and lift India's poorest. In the next three years, his organisation, Magic Bus, aims to bring one million children out of poverty.

When Mathew Spacie first came to live in Mumbai, he played rugby at the Azad Maidan Gymkhana. He noticed the children living right outside the grounds on the streets and invited them to play. Soon, he realised that the rugby sessions changed their lives - they cleaned up their lives, started attending school and were even prepared to take up jobs. "That's when I understood how powerful the medium of mentoring was and how it changes people's lives - a medium that could work from childhood, all the way to dignified livelihoods as adults," recalls Spacie, founder and CEO of Magic Bus, a non-profit organisation. Personally, rugby was a major part of Spacie's life - his character has been shaped on the pitch and he developed many good friends there. "No game has the ability to bring so much out of you," he states.

Spacie started Magic Bus as a volunteer-led initiative, in 1999, when he was the COO of Cox and Kings, a travel company. Within two years, Magic Bus had grown well and he then understood the possibility of its impact and scale. "The concept was so simple but I needed to really understand how to make a robust programme and that's when I chose to get on board as a full time CEO," he explains. He spent the initial period learning how to make the connection between mentoring via sport and some important development levers. He wanted to do this in such a way that it could reach the slums and villages across India. "My role specifically was to try and find the people who could do that - who could prove that the impact of what we were doing was important enough to move some of the big levers associated with poverty," says Spacie.

In 2005, he co-founded the travel website Cleartrip.com, more as a means to pay his rent. Till then, he had been using savings and contributions from early investors. "But it was tough working on an income that was just 20 per cent of what I had been paid in my previous for-profit role," he admits. For two years, he worked half the week at Magic Bus and the rest at Cleartrip. In 2006, he returned to Magic Bus in a full-time role and focused on growing it to quarter of a million young people enrolled in its programme each week in 10 states across India.

On the move

Magic Bus works to move some of India's poorest children out of poverty. It focuses on the vital inputs of education,

Sporting A NEW LIFE

personal and community healthcare, gender equality and livelihood to ensure that young people make the right choices from childhood till they attain gainful employment. "Local community leaders are trained to deliver the curriculum that uses sport as a metaphor to address complex development issues through the formative years of a child's life," says Spacie. For example, a group of kids play the game of football with a specific purpose that is defined by the team leader. At the end of the game, they have a review session about the game and its objective.

Every participant is offered a livelihood programme which focuses on ensuring young people actually get a job.

"One big differentiator is that Magic Bus is not setting up new institutions or processes. We are here to make sure the facilities already in place are actually reaching those they are meant to reach," states Spacie. The organisation leverages the work done by the existing non-profit organisations and the government infrastructure. "We know how to go into a village and ensure that a 14-year-old girl re-enrolls in school. But we don't want to replicate the infrastructure that is already there," he adds. Magic Bus's job is to ensure that young people know about their opportunities and the means of accessing them.

Currently, Magic Bus works in 10 states within India and plans to start exporting its programme to some Asian countries by 2014, using a franchise model. The organisation has four overseas registered charities that help raise funds in U.K., U.S., Germany and Singapore. In India, it has around 10,000 community leaders delivering its programme in slum and village communities for six hours, every week. "These young people, who themselves live in poverty, do this as volunteers because they want to change the children's lives in their community. Their daily stories are incredible - what they do and how they impact their communities inspires me to get through any day," says Spacie.

The magical role

Spacie's role encompasses three things at Magic bus - strategic direction and accountability to the board, succession planning and the A+ senior executive team

and to be an ambassador primarily to make sure there are right partnerships for growth. In a month, he spends two weeks on the road which could be literally anywhere in the world. "And in my work, you go wherever you can generate new supporters for your work," adds Spacie. He spends the rest of his time either with his top management or thinking about recruitment and communicating with and aligning the governing boards. "As a charity, we have an incredibly archaic governance system where we need to create autonomous boards in every new country. We are about to open our sixth new geography that means a board with over 25 people," he says.

Not all that different

Spacie says that there are more similarities between the for-profit and not-for-profit role than differences. Citing an example, he elaborates, "The success of Magic Bus pivots on our continual ability to attract the right people, the same as in any business. Our challenge is that we need to attract an A+ gene pool but without the war chest that my peers have in the profit world." Magic Bus currently has over 800 people. Another similarity is innovation to stay ahead. At Magic Bus, developing a novel idea into a working model that is changing a quarter of a million lives every week was very challenging.

"The biggest differences I have found are in culture," states Spacie. Non-profit organisations tend to attract highly sensitive, highly motivated individuals who are rarely in the organisation for the monetary gain. "They demand flat structures and a highly democratic environment. When you harness this energy and create leadership structures that can transcend some of the democracy, then it's the

most powerful focus you can imagine," he asserts.

As far as new ideas go, his foremost challenge is in ensuring people not just believe in their work but also help take results to the next level. "Lessons learnt from my experience at Cleartrip and Cox and Kings tell me that in order to make a real difference, you have to focus on scaling upwards," he recalls.

Along with his colleagues, Spacie has built a solution that will strike at the heart of poverty. His challenge now is to make sure that each child living in poverty has access to the Magic Bus and ends up growing up poverty-free. "This means getting on board more supporters and my corporate experience helps me to talk in a language that corporate partners understand," he shares. Magic Bus hopes to reach out to one million children over the next three year from the current 2,50,000. "But the big lever change comes from being able to create systemic changes through the integration of our programmes in to national and state government movements," he concludes.

—Poornima Kavlekar

This article was first published in The Smart CEO Magazine (www.thesmartceo.in)



Magic Bus works to move some of India's poorest children out of poverty. It focuses on the vital inputs of education, personal and community healthcare, gender equality and livelihood to ensure that young people make the right choices from childhood till they attain gainful employment.

Aim for no pain



In our rich and illustrious history of science, medicine and surgery, a great deal has been said and written about the exploits of great Indian doctors — their discoveries, the methodology that was used to treat illness and diagnose ailments. That is perhaps why we as Indians have prided ourselves on our medical exploits, while unfortunately somewhere along the way, forgetting to simply care for those who suffer from pain, by which they become the bearer of illness. In a sense, Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care Trust was built simply by the realization of these ideals. It began when Dr Mallika Tiruvadanan had admitted her father for treatment at a hospital, where she began noticing a number of patients being admitted in excruciating pain. Interestingly, the doctors would go on to treat these patients to cure them of the ailment as opposed to administering treatment that was aimed to relieving the patient of pain.

“That incident exhorted me to bring about awareness of palliative care, and tell doctors about what it is all about and why it must be an integral part of our healthcare system,” says Dr Mallika as she chats up with us about her NGO and the need for palliative care, today. Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care, Dr Mallika’s brainchild, has today become an example to follow, in terms of “caring” for the patient apart from “curing” the ailment. When the organization began in 2000, Mallika immediately knew that the first step she would have to take was to ensure that

awareness of palliative care was spread far and wide. “Sadly, the system of our medical education is such that most doctors and nurses today don’t quite know how to talk to patients especially those suffering from chronic illnesses,” says Dr Mallika, “Our MBBS curriculum doesn’t, for instance, have a chapter on palliative care.”

The Free Online Dictionary defines the term ‘palliative’ as “tending or serving to palliate. Relieving or soothing the symptoms of a disease or disorder without effecting a cure”. In the same breath, Dr Mallika believes that if there’s

With a team of consultants spearheaded by Dr. Mallika herself, Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care is all set to go the extra mile in educating the masses and the medical fraternity about the importance of palliative care.

one thing that general medicine lacks, it’s the number of experts on this subject: “there are only a handful of palliative care experts, today.” But a step in the right direction, oftentimes, goes a long way in making a difference.

“We began with a set of foundation courses that were attended by doctors, paramedics and nurses,” says Dr Mallika, “In fact, a course called Essentials In Palliative Medicine which we have been conducting since 2006 has gone a long way in really making a difference to the kind of work that we do on an everyday basis.” She continues: “In the end it’s all about education and awareness.”

Part of the process of spreading awareness also involves breaking misconceptions about palliative care. One such misconception is the belief that palliative care is deemed necessary only in the case of terminal illness, when in reality palliative care could be administered right from the beginning of diagnosis. However, Mallika feels that the greater misconception that needs to be broken down is simply the notion that morphine (normally administered to bring relief from extreme pain) is addictive. “In fact, we were lobbying for several years as far as licensing the

nation’s narcotic policies is concerned,” she says, “And a lot of this campaigning had to do with the need for oral administration of morphine and lobbying to make the drug increasingly available.”

In fact, so committed has the organization been towards increasing awareness and bringing out large-scale palliative care in the system, that its website www.lakshmitrust.org has a comprehensive list of FAQs, misconceptions about palliative care, real-life scenarios and what can be done to tackle them, testimonials and even a brief history of palliative care and the trust itself. With a vision to develop

palliative care facilities and human resources that are equipped with sufficient knowledge to become authorities in the field, one might feel that Lakshmi is well and truly on the track to educating the masses about the niche medical necessity.

Through its journey, the NGO has also had to overcome several challenges in terms of raising funds to fulfill its objectives and goals. And the requirement is definitely quite significant, today. “We have an inpatient clinic and an outpatient care unit, which works towards easing the pain of our patients,” says Mallika. And needless to say, funds are crucial to the running of such a vast network of pro-bono services. A team of doctors and paramedics also conducts home-visits on a regular basis, visiting the homes of those patients who are unable to visit the clinic, and taking care of their treatment and care.

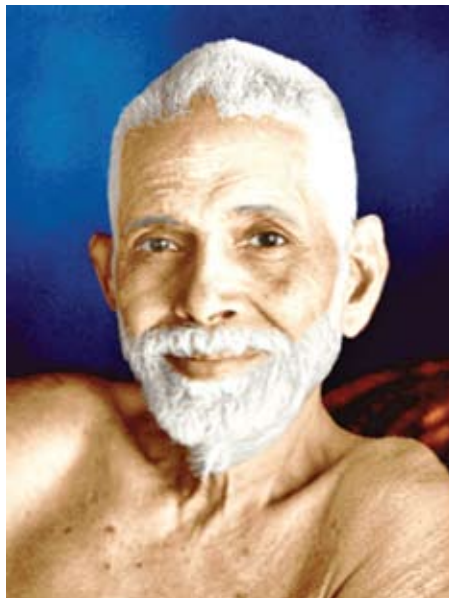
With a team of consultants spearheaded by Dr Mallika herself, Lakshmi Pain and Palliative Care is all set to go the extra mile in educating the masses and the medical fraternity about the importance of palliative care. But there is of course, a greater mission that lies ahead: “that of allaying the sufferings of those who are in need of palliative care,” says Mallika. She couldn’t have said it better. One hopes that her small steps towards educating the masses about the importance of palliative care, has a far greater and significant outcome in the years to come.

An Inspiring Conversation with Shri Ramana Maharishi

While explaining a stanza of his own Sri Bhagavan observed: The sun illumines the universe, whereas the Sun of Arunachala is so dazzling that the universe is obscured and an unbroken brilliance remains. But it is not realised in the present state and can be realised only if the lotus of the heart blossoms. The ordinary lotus blossoms in the light of the visible sun, whereas the subtle Heart blossoms only before the Sun of Suns. May Arunachala make my heart blossom so that His unbroken brilliance may shine all alone!

Further on, Sri Bhagavan continued: The mirror reflects objects; yet they are not real because they cannot remain apart from the mirror.

Similarly, the world is said to be a reflection in the mind as it does not remain in the absence of mind. The question



arises: if the universe is a reflection, there must be a real object known as the universe in order that it might be reflected in the mind. This amounts to an admission of the existence of an objective universe. Truly speaking, it is not so.

Therefore the dream illustration is set forth. The dream world has no objective existence. How then is it created? Some mental impressions should be admitted. They are called *vasanas*. How were the *vasanas* in the mind? The answer is: they were subtle. Just as a whole tree is contained potentially in a seed, so the world is in the mind.

Then it is asked: A seed is the product of the tree which must have existed once in order that it may be reproduced. So the world also must have been there some time. The answer is, No! There must have been several incarnations to

gather the impressions which are re-manifested in the present form. I must have existed before as I do now. The straight way to find an answer will be to see if the world is there. Admitting the existence of the world I must admit a seer who is no other than myself. Let me find myself so that I may know the relation between the world and the seer. When I seek the Self and abide as the Self there is no world to be seen. What is the Reality then? The seer only and certainly not the world.

Such being the truth the man continues to argue on the basis of the reality of the world. Whoever asked him to accept a brief for the world?

Yoga Vasishta clearly defines Liberation as the abandonment of the false and remaining as Being.

—Excerpted from Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

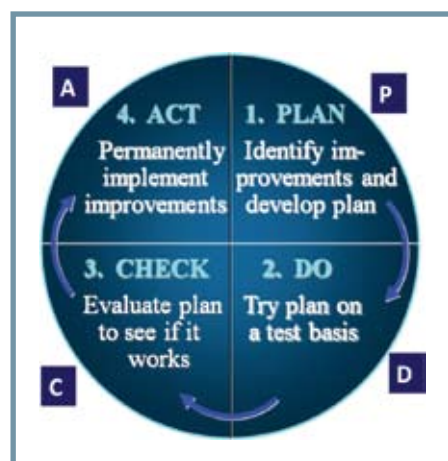
Belongingness Dimensions – PDCA cycle for quality processes

‘We cannot have a mere logical solution to a human problem; neither can we have a pure emotional solution devoid of logic for an organizational issue’. An organization is a group of people who come together for a common purpose. A social organization is where the purpose is more finely defined as that which directly impacts the well-being of the society. Therefore, it is the people, or human capital that actually makes the social organization. In that case, being organizational set up, enabling people to work together and achieve the vision requires processes that will take care of both emotional and logical space. While in the last article we deliberated the importance of well laid out systems and processes, in this article let us look at the PDCA methodology. PDCA enables easy problem solving cycle created by W Edwards Deming in the 1950’s and further popularized by Deming with a Continuous Improvement process to help rebuild Japanese industries. PDCA is an acronym for Plan- Do- Check- Act.

1. Plan:

The main purpose of this step is to investigate the current situation and identify the issue at a cause level. The key methodology to identify the problem at a cause level is to ask the 5WH questions. This methodology of enquiry process is highly comprehensive because it answers all dimensions of the problem.

- What – defines the problem
- Where – gives the location of the problem
- When – gives the timing of the problem
- Why – gives the cause
- Who – accountability to the problem
- How – process which creates the problem



Source: QFD EQUIP presentation prepared by Prathaap.B

One of the most effective ways of using this is the Brainstorming methodology along with using the Fish bone cause and effect diagram. To deepen the enquiry process, the root causes are identified using the 5 why test i.e., questioning each answer with a ‘why’ to deepen the enquiry. The answers are captured in a process flow diagram and represented graphically to allow everyone to capture the essence of the enquiry easily. Many social organizations struggle with regard to resource crunch and time constraints. There is a danger of not exploring the causes in depth and formulating quick fix solutions that have low level impact endangering sustainability of the social organization.

2. DO:

The key activity of this stage is to brainstorm again using the 5WH methodology for identifying solutions. So identified possibilities are ranked to choose the one with the best impact.

Usually social organizations are action-prone and in a hurry to implement the solutions that are identified. They fail to carry out a clear Failure Prevention Analysis. It is critical to identify and clearly mark the possible failures that can block the process. This is a process improvement step. Along with this the effect of the solution also needs to be analyzed. The team that should be involved in this brainstorming should include representation of all the stakeholders. This analysis needs to be well documented and a project plan should be prepared along with well thought out measures of performance. If a work cannot be brought down to measurement, it is highly impossible to arrive at a monitoring mechanism. Social organizations are usually wary of performance measures. Since they term that most work is with the community and intangibles they are also at a loss to project the impact analysis of the work undertaken.

3. CHECK:

This phase involves collection of data to check on the implementation of the project plan. The same is monitored through data measures that are formulated. The key activities of this phase involve education, feedback and based on the data that emerges from the field preparation of counter measures. In most organizations the program implementation and the check has to go on as a parallel activity with equal weightage. But usually the check is given lower priority and program implementation becomes the focus. This again leaves a huge vacuum when impact analysis has to be measured at a later stage.

4. ACT:

This phase is the review of the solution continuously and make the necessary

changes where required. The solutions that have been found needs to be first experimented as a pilot to determine the efficacy. It is interesting to note that pilot actually requires higher level of rigor and depth than the program implementation itself. Yet again for want of resources and time, social organizations sacrifice pilot phase or take a shortcut to hasten the run of the program. Even the funding agencies and the recipients many a time have very less patience for pilot and review. Those projects that have done extensive and in-depth pilot and analysis reviews have longer sustainability. Based on the impact analysis after the program run, learning is captured and a new agenda is fixed. The next PDCA cycle begins again for the new agenda.

The relevance of all these actions in a social organization cannot be underplayed if quality and sustainability are expected outcomes. At the same time, the benefit of the PDCA cycle is in it being seen as an enabler and not the end point or a mere set of activities to be completed.

Reflections:

1. What are the projects in which I can adopt the PDCA cycle and ensure quality in the processes?
2. How many times do I effectively use the 5WH enquiry process and 5why test for in depth analysis?
3. To what extent do I do the failure prevention analysis and solution impact analysis for the projects in my organization?
4. To what extent do I have clear measurement criteria to tap the impact of the projects that I undertake in my organization?

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath, PhD.

Why India needs social entrepreneurship to succeed?

India is at the crossroads. After a decade of high GDP growth rates of around 7-9 per cent, the 2008 global recession poured cold water on the Indian growth story, in 2012-13, growth is expected to be a tepid 5 per cent. The growth post-liberalization, benefited the rich, (the increase in number of Indian millionaires was second only to China), and a newly created middle class. What of the rest? Most of India or 400 odd million people live on less than \$1 a day. In the latest 2012 human development index (HDI) report, India languishes at 136, out of 187 countries.

The players who can affect positive change- the government and NGOs are trying, with varying degrees of success, but their interventions fall woefully short of what is needed to combat India's pressing problems. Capitalism's fruit was supposed to drop down to all, but the much touted trickle-down economics, hasn't delivered. Income inequality has doubled in the last 20 years. Einstein said famously, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them," perhaps what is needed now is a business as unusual approach. This is where social enterprises (socents) can play a role. They use market-proven business practices to solve social and environmental problems. In the world of socents, business and philanthropy collide, and strive to create a more equitable and sustainable world. They may not be the silver bullet for all of India's gargantuan problems related to agriculture, poverty, infrastructure, healthcare and education, but they may perhaps



be our best bet.

With a business as unusual approach, socents are turning rice husk into electric power (Husk Power Systems), employing the power of the sun to bring light (Selco), bringing healthcare to rural areas (Vaatsalya Healthcare), introducing solar-powered ATMs to villages (Vortex Engineering), providing emergency ambulance services (Ziqitza Health Care), teaching English (EnglishHelper) and giving access to affordable potable drinking water. Socents are identifying markets and problems that have been ignored and solving them using innovative products and services. Most of the global case studies on successful socents are peppered with Indian examples.

Social entrepreneurship could also help India avoid the mistake China made with its growth. The Red Dragon's phenomenal economic growth has come at the cost of air, water and soil pollution. Anger over pollution has replaced land disputes to become the chief cause for social unrest in China. Socents with their inherent vision of sustainable growth that is environmentally friendly are well equipped to balance growth with environmental concerns.

While India had made giant strides in the last decade in the area of social entrepreneurship, this is just the beginning and more is needed. Government needs to step up to the plate and make it easier for both foreign and domestic investors to invest

in socents. A better regulatory framework, smoother taxation policies, creation of multiple investment bodies, using innovative investment vehicles like UK's social impact bonds, co-investing in technology based socents, creation of a separate index like Singapore's Impact Investment Index (IIX), are just some of things it needs to do.

One of the most interesting developments in the past few months has been the CSR bill proposed by the government where 2 per cent of profits for big companies will be used for social programmes that includes investment in social business ventures. This could be a huge boost for socents, and give them access to more than a billion dollars in precious

capital, that is needed especially at the seed and early stages. Husk Power Systems, for example, benefited from the grant that it got from Shell Foundation in its early days of technology creation.

Growth in the next 100 years cannot follow the road that capitalism took us in the last century, the earth's finite resources are already depleted, and the environment already reeling from over-exploitation. There's already talk of social capitalism and creative capitalism in the US and Europe. India need not be far behind, and design its own version of capitalism, one that uses social entrepreneurship in abundance.

—Nelson Moses

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I thank you for remembering me and sending copies of the May issue of 'Conversations'.

I was quite impressed to read the contents thereof. Needless to say, the reporting of the work done by some of our fellow-human beings left me gasping and humbled me.

The likes of Mr. Rafi, Mr. Christodas Gandhi, IAS. (not to forget that lady, Ms Qudsia Begum), Dr. Seenivasan and Mr Rajamanickam reinforces my belief that this world is still populated by good humans whose selfless service should be not only lauded, but emulated by each one of us.

God Bless them and may their Tribe increase !

Regards,
Dr. Balaram Biswakumar
Chennai

Dear Editor,

We have been associating with Anbagam for a long time.

Anbhagam coverage in the Conversation is superb. The design of Conversation is really elegant.

My sincere appreciation to you and the whole team for this noble effort.

Regards,
Ravi
Vishwa Seva Educational Trust

Editorial

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

“If you are ready to donate food, then prepare fresh food and give it to them. This is charity!”

Dr. Chef Damodaran shares with **Marie Banu** his thoughts on how starvation can be eradicated.

Dr. Chef Damodaran is the first Indian to have received a doctorate in hotel management and catering technology. He is also the holder of Guinness Record for Longest Cooking Marathon.

He has been drafted by the social welfare department to provide healthy, lip-smacking food to children in State Government and Corporation Schools. With the government introducing variety rice and dishes made of pulses and vegetables in the menu, Chef Damodaran provides training to noon meal cooks and helps them to add spice to the lunch served to the students.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Chef Damodaran shares with Marie Banu about his passion for cooking.

As an internationally acclaimed chef, when did you realize that you had a passion for cooking?

I started cooking when I was seven years old. One day, when my mother went out, I cooked *uppuma*. It got stuck to the *kadai* and I got a good spanking from my mother when she returned. At that time, we only had kerosene pump stove and firewood stove, and used mud pots, bronze and aluminium vessels.

I used to wonder why my mother and my aunt spent over two hours in the kitchen just to cook *sambhar* and potato *masala*. They used to get tired after cooking just two dishes, which would not even be good. My inner mind always wanted to do something for this.

When I joined BSc Chemistry at Presidency College in Chennai, I told my father that I wanted to do Catering Management. My mother was against it as she wanted me to finish my graduation. I convinced her, and joined Institute of Hotel Management Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition at Taramani in Chennai.

Can you please share your learning experience in Institute of Hotel Management? Was your career path easy?

I had a lot of interest to bring about innovation in kitchen and had an opportunity to work part-time at Hotel Sudarshan International (now Ambassador Pallava). I started making mocktails and fruit salads and was also involved in outdoor catering. I observed a lot of things, learnt how to spread a buffet, and even tasted a few dishes without the knowledge of the hoteliers.



We used to serve the Indian cricket team when Kapil Dev was Captain. I was thrilled to see VIPs while I was still studying, and felt happy to have the opportunity to serve them.

When I was pursuing my third year of Catering Management, Mr. Arvind Saraswat, Executive Chef of Taj Coromandel was my examiner. He asked the recipe for a dish that I prepared and said that it was not the actual procedure that is usually adopted. He appreciated me and I scored 147/150.

After a year, I joined Taj in Chennai. The Executive Chef from Ashoka Hotel in Bangalore visited Taj and after tasting my food asked me to join his hotel. During this period, I earned maximum and also did my best. I was happy when customers called me from the kitchen to give me money as a token of appreciation for my food.

I joined Sangam Hotel in Trichy as Executive Chef cum F&B Manager. I did a lot of innovation here. In 1986 I got married and had to return to Chennai. I joined Asan Catering College as Vice-Principal. I always had the ambition to create a record and worked hard for six years to achieve my goal. I moved on to be the Principal of MGR Institute of

Hotel Management and worked for over seventeen years.

About your Guinness record?

I wanted to set a Guinness record and worked on it for over two years. For this, I required 24 lakh rupees, and could only source sponsorship of 18 lakhs from CavinKare and Jaya TV. I spent the rest of the money and sent about 500 recipes to Guinness World Records.

I was 52 years old then, and the Guinness team was worried if I would be able to stand continuously for 24 hours. I trusted in God, and with the help of my boys created the Guinness record.

It was a record for longest cooking marathon which lasted for 24 hours, 30 minutes, and 12 seconds; and preparing 617 dishes—one dish every two minutes. My family was thrilled and my wife cried when I received the award. She was worried that I would faint as I have never stood for 24 hours at a stretch.

After winning the record, I underwent physiotherapy for three years to recoup my health.

What are your thoughts about the change in food culture?

I will always blame the parents for the

change in food culture, because both of them are mostly office goers. They have the choice of tasting a pizza or a burger instead of cooking *sambhar* or *rasam* at home. If this trend continues, then in 20 years' time you will not find a kitchen in any of the houses. There will only be a micro oven and re-heatable food.

The youngsters today are getting lazy and it is the elderly, middle-aged people, and housewives who cook at home. Everyone is capable of cooking well; all we need is just one hour in the kitchen. I have written 26 cookery books so far. I am now writing a book based on millets based cooking. Millets has 14.5 percent fibre content and is healthy for people.

Talking about food, what can one do to eradicate starvation in our country?

Starvation is due to people not having access to food. People have got money, but do not know whom to donate it to. If ten percent of our population engages in charity, there would be no starvation. Nowadays, subsidized food is available for the general public and 10 rupees would suffice to feed a person.

You had recently trained noon meal scheme employees across the State of Tamil Nadu. Can you share more information about this?

I visited all the 32 districts and trained 125,000 employees in preparing different types of variety rice—*channa pulao*, lemon rice, curry leaf rice, *bisi bela bhath*, *sambhar* rice, and different kinds of boiled eggs—*masala* egg, pepper egg, and tomato egg. All these are of good taste and have high protein content.

We sat with the children and ate the food along with them. They were very happy as they tasted it for the first time.

You have been engaging in a lot of charitable activities. Which of the social issues are you passionate about?

I do not like people giving away left over food to the poor. If you are ready to donate food, then prepare fresh food and give it to the needy. This is charity! When we have a domestic function and have food wasted, we donate it. This is not charity, but disposal of wastage.

My passion lies in supporting the elderly and special children. Every month, I visit an old age home at Pallavaram where 80 inmates belonging to the age of 70 to 90 live. I prepare food for them, and also entertain them. I also train spastic children in baking, and support a special school in Villupuram.