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The success story is written on the faces of those helped

Begun over two decades ago, Navajeevana continues to empower and transform people with different kinds of disabilities through its community rehabilitation programme. Smriti Daniel talks to Kumarini Wickramasuriya, the founder of the organisation. Pix by Sanka Vidanagama

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When Kumarini Wickramasuriya thinks about the number of people her organisation Navajeevana has helped, she knows that it goes far beyond the official figure of 40,000 disabled people. Instead, each of them has become the proverbial pebble in the pond and the ripples have spread to encompass not just families but entire communities. Today, over two decades after she founded it, Navajeevana, continues to do essential work in Sri Lanka, working to empower and transform people with all kinds of disabilities through its community rehabilitation programme.

Based in the Hambantota district in the south, Mrs. Wickramasuriya has seen her organisation grow from working with a handful of patients in 1987 to over 3,000 people in 2008 alone. But, Navajeevana is not sitting comfortably on its laurels, this year they have unveiled a new responsible tourism project, one which seeks to rehabilitate marginalised groups by providing them with the skills and opportunities to make a valuable and lasting contribution to local tourism. Several other initiatives are in place to reach out to local communities, raising awareness, imparting essential skills and providing the support families need to live full lives.



Mrs. Wickramasuriya makes it all look easy, though you know it has been anything but that. With no previous experience in the field, she founded Navajeevana, barely a year after her husband, Dr. Sena Wickramasuriya, passed away. At her side were the funders Dr. Wickramasuriya had originally recruited for a similar organisation he had intended to establish. When asked whether it was difficult to put aside her grief, she says that she only had to look at the people she was working with to get some perspective – their circumstances were humbling and their suffering placed her own sorrow into context for her. And there was

plenty of work to submerge herself in. At that time, disabled people enjoyed even less support than they do now, so much so that when Navajeevana was looking for people to work with, they had to put up posters advertising their medical camp. No records were available with social services or any of the other organisations, conventional wisdom would have them rely on.

From the very beginning Mrs. Wickramasuriya was determined that Navajeevana would welcome people with all kinds of disabilities. Of course this made organising the infrastructure a nightmare. Different equipment and systems of treatment were required to work with the blind and the deaf, the lame and the paralysed. Having risen to the challenge, they implemented what Mrs. Wickramasuriya will tell you, lies at the heart of Navajeevana – their community based rehabilitation (CBR) programme. In more recent years, in partnership with Basic Needs, Navajeevana became the first organisation in the island to provide community mental health development programmes.

Navajeevana's work has inspired a small army of nearly 400 volunteers to work alongside the organization's professional field officers in the two districts of Hambantota and Matara. The CBR unit itself is made up of the core CBR field unit, the mental health unit, the education unit, and the livelihood income generation unit. Field officers travel around on bikes, visiting homes individually and gauging each family's unique needs.

The team tries to identify its disabled clients as early as possible, says Mrs. Wickramasuriya. Having met plenty of disabled people who were denied basic education, she knows how hard it can be to catch up and how early intervention can make the difference between a social outcast and fully integrated member of society. In recognition of how important a role education plays, Navajeevana currently runs four schools for disabled patients. Having adopted a holistic approach, the team sees the disabled person through from early identification to treatment, education rehabilitation and ideally into full rehabilitation where the individual is welcomed into a community and is capable of supporting himself or herself.



Sharing the responsibility for all this is Navajeevana's new CEO, Major Anil Seneviratne. Having lived with a war-related disability for over 13 years, Major Seneviratne says he has keen understanding of what it means to be disabled in Sri Lanka. Soft spoken and earnest, he describes the facility that is the jewel in Navajeevana's crown – their fully accessible rehabilitation centre in Tangalle. Here they provide a range of paramedical services, including physiotherapy, prosthetics and orthotics, speech therapy, supportive seating, wheelchair production, audiological services and physiotherapy.

Mrs. Wickramasuriya too has experienced how debilitating disability can be. A stroke in 2000 left her paralysed on one side. Looking back, she says it was a tribute to the effectiveness of Navajeevana's approach that her team had her back at her desk after several months of intense physiotherapy. She has taken away some important lessons from it, and

seems to have a deep appreciation of what it means to truly empower people. Navajeevana actively supports the formation of local councils for the disabled, and it is Mrs.

Wickramasuriya's belief that soon the funds will be given directly to the people who need it, and that their voice will ring truest as their needs are heard. Her optimism for the future is catching, and her gift for making lasting partnerships with like-minded organisations has created a sturdy foundation for Navajeevana's continued growth.

Today, having seen her work recently recognized by a Zonta Woman of Achievement Award for Community Service, Mrs. Wickramasuriya will still tell you that her greatest reward is however not in the accolades, but in the faces of the families that Navajeevana has given hope and dignity to.