

## **Mrs. Sriyani Nonis: A Role Model for All**

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Mrs. Sriyani Nonis was an extraordinary lady. It was all most a decade ago, that I first met her. My first impressions, within a few moments of talking to her, are the same impressions I have to this day – having met her and her family on many occasions on business and at social events. I remember with considerable admiration, the dignity and decorum, the warmth, sincerity and grace with which she always conducted her self. She was a wonderful mixture of kindness and generosity, with an unusual balance in the way she engaged herself in business and charity. I was inspired by the way she personally dedicated time to the less than privileged, or differently challenged, while leading the second oldest diversified business group in Sri Lanka – Mackwoods. A role she performed for a period of over 40 years.

Having met and interacted closely with her children at Mackwoods or at the always very pleasant dinners at her home, I knew and understood well, why she always appeared confident that they would continue both her business interest and her charitable interests with the same admirable values and principles she was known for. This was possibly why she exuded an air of contentment, at all times.

Few could claim to have achieved the balance she achieved, between building a business and building a home.

An achievement, those who value business enterprises or those who give awards for corporate governance or business excellence, do not have a measure for. Thus, to my mind, she was a role model for leaders in the professions or politics, leaders in business or in civil society.

### **Values**

This is not simply an appreciation, for there are so many of them from many parts of the world that have poured in and which her family treasures. I decided to write this article the moment I put down the phone after hearing the sad news that we had lost her. This is the first time that I have paused in my work to write an article about someone I knew. I do so with a purpose. My purpose is simple.

But I think it is valid and necessary, particularly in today's local and global context where there has been such an erosion of values and an absence of appreciation of the kind of life style she was known for. My purpose is to invite those who read this article to take an example from this truly wonderful human being.

I had the privilege of getting to know Mrs. Nonis even more, in the latter part of the 1990's when I was invited to advise Mackwoods regarding an international business transaction.

Throughout the complex discussions with local and foreign representatives, both here and overseas, Mrs. Nonis always maintained a balanced and pragmatic view. Always calm, collected and unruffled, but yet very clear in her thinking. Brief and concise in what she said and graciously determined to maintain a stand on any issue she believed was right.

During some of these negotiations overseas, I had the opportunity to meet her son Chris, a physician, who was at the time practicing in London and I saw in him, much of Mrs. Nonis character. Much later about 3 years ago, Chris joined a business mission I had to lead to Poland and I realized how perceptive, focused, and professional he was.

When her daughter Shelley had graduated from University College London with a L.L.B. degree, Mrs. Nonis contacted me to explore opportunities for her to work in the consulting division of the firm I was with at the time. Subsequently, Shelley began working with us.

She was eager and intelligent and was unassuming like her mother then and is just the same today. I yet recall with pleasure attending the reception to celebrate her enrolment as an Attorney-at-Law here in Sri Lanka.

I wonder whether it is coincidence that I also had the privilege of working closely with yet another daughter of Mrs. Nonis, through activities of the Chambers of Commerce and the Sri Lankan-Poland Business Council.

Nirmali, a fellow of the chartered institute of management accountants, is the current president of the National Chamber of Commerce of Sri Lanka. Mrs Nonis' eldest daughter Kshama too is a professional, having qualified as a teacher in the United Kingdom.

Mrs. Nonis had several firsts to her credit. She had achieved much in her profession, in business, in social service and most importantly in creating and maintaining a warm home for her children, but she shunned publicity and rarely gave an interview to the press or a magazine.

Out of respect for her, I thought I would take time to get to know more about her before I wrote this article. The very little that follows, of what I now know even more of, will I am sure inspire many to take an example from her.

The youngest daughter of the late Mr. & Mrs. N.S.O. Mendis, who was one of the first Sri Lankans to make successful takeover bids in the City of London, she could have lived the life of luxury and privilege, but chose instead to forge her way as a professional, with out relying on those privileges.

### **Her Legal Career.**

After qualifying as a Barrister-at-Law at the honourable Society of Gray's Inn in 1962, she interned with justice John Baker, Q.C., and worked thereafter in the Chambers of D. Foot Q.C., and E.F.N. Gratiaen, Q.C. On her return to Sri Lanka she was enrolled as an Attorney-at-Law in 1970. It was an enormous sense of pride and joy to her when her youngest daughter Shellendra continued this tradition by qualifying as a Barrister-at-Law also of Gray's Inn.

### **Entry into the Corporate World**

Her entry into the corporate world was at the young age of 22, as a London Barister, when she made news in the British press, being the youngest Sri Lankan female to be appointed to the Boards of three London based Sterling Companies.

She was involved with Mackwoods from the early 1960's in her capacity as Director, Deputy Chairperson, and Chairperson until her sad demise in June this year. Established in 1841, it was Ceylonised in 1956 by Mrs. Nonis's father – the late N.S.O. Mendis. She continued his vision, and expanded its diverse business portfolio, which today includes healthcare, agribusiness, plantations, industry, export/import trading and information technology.

She was the only women in Sri Lanka to hold the position of Chairperson of a plantation company-Agalawatte Plantations Limited, which manages 16 tea and rubber estates comprising a land base of 27,000 acres and approximately 9800 employees. It was under her Chairmanship that Mackwoods made the bold and far-sighted move of bidding for management of this Plantation Company, which she successfully turned around within 2 years of management, and subsequently acquired the controlling interest. She was keen about the creation of value for the Sri Lankan Tea industry, and personally pioneered Fine Tea & Opera Events in Europe, including London & Vienna, which received critical acclaim in the European press.

She was keen about diversification to secure the viability of the Plantation Industry, and under her Chairmanship initiated several downstream diversification project which included the joint-venture Centrifuge Latex Company; development of Mackwoods Labookellie Tea Centre; and diversification in Oil Palm, via AEN, the three way joint venture between the plantation companies of Mackwoods, John Keells, and Aitken Spence, she also espoused numerous social and welfare projects on the estates, in particular the development of crèches, vocational training centres, scholarships for higher education, and upgrading of housing.

She was on the council of the Employers Federation of Ceylon and her diverse exposure in the corporate sector also imbibed in her an acute sensitivity to the needs of her employees.

She was much loved by all sectors of her staff at Mackwoods, and he tremendous outpouring of grief upon her demise, was a reflection of the deep affection they had for her.

### **A Voice for Professional Women**

There are many who speak about the rights of women, gender equality etc. Sriyani Nonis did not seek these special concessions as one might call it. She earned it the old fashioned way, she worked for it. She was president of the Sri Lanka women Lawyers Association and Vice president of the Zonta Club I of Sri Lanka, Member of the Women's Chamber of Industry & Commerce and The Business and Professional Women's Association. One of her proudest moments, was when her daughter Nirmali achieved the milestone of being elected the first woman president of the National Chamber of Commerce of Sri Lanka, earlier this year.

She did not need awards for Governance or Philanthropy. There is so much that has been written on corporate governance – there are manuals, checklists and codes. For Mrs. Nonis and Mackwoods they practiced good governance perhaps long before the first code was written in England. Corporate Social Responsibility, yet another buzzword is much spoken of today.

So much so that, every annual report has a special segment on it and there are Awards for CSR. I recall asking Mrs. Nonis about 5 years ago, what charitable projects and CSR initiatives the Group was participating in and she simply smiled. Sriyani Nonis was on of the few Corporate Chairmen I knew of who actually carried out the Charity herself, silently, prioritizing her time for her charitable causes over the corporate cocktail circuit Charity.

Her passion was to espouse the cause of those in need. She was at all times mindful of preserving the dignity of the recipient, and this she achieved by not publicizing or seeking praise or accolades for her efforts.

As Trustee and Chair of the private charity fund which was started by her father, (The Mendis Mackwoods Charity Fund – MMCF) over 20 years ago, she together with the other Trustees was able to help hundreds of individuals at grass-root level, the disabled, and the disadvantaged, and was instrumental in providing university scholarships in the fields of arts and sciences, and, at any one time was helping over 40 institutions throughout Sri Lanka.

To her, the prerogatives of corporate life were subservient to her role as a silent angel for the poor.