

Sriyani Nonis A Role Model for Business Leaders Tuesday 13th September, 2005. – The Island

MS. Sriyani Nonis was an extraordinary lady and I first met her almost a decade ago. My first impressions, within a few moments of talking to her are the same impressions I have this day. I have 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 herself. She is a wonderful mixture of kindness and generous; with an unusual balance in the way she engaged herself in business and in charity. The Way She Personally Dedicated Time To The Less Than Privileged, Or The Differently disabled 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 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 profession or politics, leaders in business or in civil society.

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 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 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. Through 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's 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 Chamber of Commerce and the Sri Lanka-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's eldest daughter Ksham, 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 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, without relying on the those privileges.

Her Legal Career

After qualifying as a Barrister-at-Law at the 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 Sheldendra continued this tradition by qualifying as a Barister-at-Law also Of Gray's Inn

Entry into the Corporate World

Her entry in the corporate world was at the young age of 22, as a London barrister, 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 demise in June this year.

Established in 1841, it was Ceylonised in 1956 by Mrs. Nonis's farther – 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 estate 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 for the Sri Lankan Tea Industry, and personally pioneered Fine Tea and Opera Events in Europe, including London and 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 the Mackwoods Labookellie Tea Centre; and diversification into Oil Palm, via AEN, the three way joint venture between the plantation companies of Mackwoods, John Keels, 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 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 the tremendous out pouring of grief upon her demise, was a reflection of the deep affection they had for her.

She was 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 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.

There is so much that has been written on corporate governance – there are manuals, checklists and codes. For Mrs. Nonis and Mackwoods they would have been practicing 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 one 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.

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 farther; (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 prerogatives of corporate life were subservient to her role as a silent angel for the poor.

Her response to the Tsunami went beyond words or pledges

The manner in which she initiated a swift response by the Mackwoods Group on the day following the Tsunami in December 2004 was so typical of her pragmatic approach. She took time to visit areas affected by the Tsunami and hear and understand the plight of those affected. I learnt how she herself bought and distributed essential supplies to Tsunami Victims more than giving in cash or kind, she gave of herself.

I was deeply touched to see how Shelley held very close to her a scrap book of several events of Mrs. Nonis life and the many letters of condolence and appreciation which I myself was deeply moved by simply after going through these for just 10 minutes. Due to lack of space I will quote from only the following: - Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, Apostolic Nuncio To His Holiness Pope Benedict Wrote; "Mrs. Nonis Was An Excellent Example Of Christian Heroism And Faith And I Met Her During The Time We Worked Together Preparing For The Visit Of The Pope John Paul Ii To Sri Lanka Back In 1995. I Noted Her Great Sense Of Simplicity, Dedication To God And Her Great Sense Of Concern For The poor and The Under Privileged. I Was Glad To Have Associated With Her." Close family friends, Moira & Preethi quoted – " I classed her among the very rare people who appear without a sound, discharge and dispense kindness, benevolence, good will and compassion without restraint and disappear without a trace, non the wiser, other than the one above". Lindsay Ross, Executive Director, Commonwealth Press Union Wrote, "Sriyani Was A Remarkable And Delightful Woman Who Charmed All Those Who Met Her; Her Role As Chairperson Of Mackwoods Made Her A Renowned Figure In The Business But She Was Also A Great Role Model For Women In Sri Lanka-Indeed Everywhere. The modesty with which she handled her complex business interest was truly inspirational and she never lost her sense of humour. Her wide-ranging interests and international experience made her a delightful companion.

Now, as I continue to be a friend and associate of her children, I know that Kshama, Nirmali, Chris and shelly will not only sustain, but also add further strength to her many endeavours and in doing so will be guided by the values Mrs. Sriyani Nonis, cherished, of honesty and integrity of humility and simplicity never compromising on what is good and what is right. As her youngest, shelly, so touchingly said at her memorial mass "her spirit lives on within us, her children" – yes Mrs. Sriyani Nonis was an extraordinary lady- yes she is a role model for all....