



AN ABODE
OF HOPE

SRI MATHA TRUST

This is a story of how destiny, implicit trust and confidence in self can result in great relief for thousands of cancer-stricken patients and their care takers.

It is a busy Wednesday morning. The traffic signal at Madhya Kailash, Adyar is choc-a-bloc with cars, buses, scooters and motorcycles coming in from all directions. The constant honking, idling, revving of hundreds of vehicles at the same time and place has added several degrees to the already soaring peak summer heat. Pedestrians dart across the on-coming traffic in an effort to beat them and ultimately reach their destinations on time. The hassled and overwhelmed traffic policemen try their best to bring order to the madness. Amidst the chaos outside, the inside of the three storied corner building, abutting Sardar Patel Road in Adyar and part of the row of buildings comprising the old Adyar Cancer Institute complex, is bustling with activity. The chairs in the large waiting area in the ground floor are getting filled up rapidly by young, not-so-young and old people from different parts of India. Some of them carry luggage and suitcases while waiting for their turn. Several volunteers walk briskly among them – enquiring, talking and occasionally shouting across the waiting area to someone out of sight. To one side of the waiting area is a room stacked with sacks of fresh vegetables, rice, dhal and many more provision items. A young girl is busy opening the sacks and transferring fresh potatoes, onions and tomatoes into appropriate bins and shelves along the wall. On the other side of the waiting area is a corridor with rooms on either side. One can see steel cots arranged in neat rows along the wall, with people resting or sitting or combing their hair and chatting with one another. The first and second floors which have access through a gradient ramp and a separate set of stairs consist of similar rooms with cots and people occupying every cot. At the far end of the corridor in the ground floor is the kitchen. The floor is covered with large brass and stainless steel

drums, pans and plates filled with freshly cut vegetables, sambar, rasam, boiled rice, etc. In one corner of the kitchen is a group of 3 men vigorously cutting, splicing and dicing potatoes, onions, bhindi and cabbage to size. In a smaller ante room to the kitchen, a row of stoves are boiling, steaming or frying for the sumptuous and delicious food that will be served as lunch to every person in the building – free of charge and for every day of the year. Breakfast consisting of 1500 idlis and 22 kgs of kichadi had already been served at 7.00 am, the cooking for which had started early in the morning at 3.00 AM. The process for dinner will follow soon after lunch is served.

This is a typical day at the shelter run by “Sri Matha Trust”, a home away from home for cancer patients from outside Chennai. Since 2000, it has provided safe shelter and high quality food for thousands of patients who travel several hundred miles from their homes to get treatment at Chennai’s world famous Adyar Cancer Institute.

At the epicenter of this frenzied activity is Mr. V. Krishnamurthy, the highly focused managing trustee of Sri Matha Trust and his able lieutenant Dr. Vijayasree.

THE BEGINNING

Sometime in late 1999, His Holiness Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi Mutt had a famous visitor with a strange request. The visitor was none other than Dr. V. Shantha, the pioneering spirit behind the Adyar Cancer Institute. Her request to the Acharya – “please take over the running of the stay home constructed by the cancer institute”. The stay home which was donated by benevolent individuals led by Mr. Nahar, a Marwari, was meant for out-of-town patients to stay while they underwent treatment at the Institute. The Adyar Cancer Institute had difficulties in running the facility. The Holy Seer thought about this briefly and simply assured her that it will be taken care



of. He then called for 55 year old V. Krishnamurthy, an ardent follower and volunteer, who was then working in Indian Oil Corporation after joining the organization in 1965. “Krishnamurthy, you have worked enough for your-self. Now quit your job and take up the responsibility of running the stay home at the Adyar Cancer Centre. It’s time you worked for others in need”. For Krishnamurthy, though he had made a name for himself for his integrity and as an able manager and administrator, this was a call that he never expected. He was not sure that he could handle this responsibility. But, the command had come from his Guru. So, without hesitation he quit his job of 35 years and flung himself headlong into the new job. For him this was pay-back time.

V. KRISHNAMURTHY

Born in Kandanoor, Tamil Nadu in 1944, Krishnamurthy, one of five siblings, lost his mother to diarrhea when he was just ten

years old. Life was hard and the family could not afford to educate him beyond school. So, after completing schooling at Kandanoor, Krishnamurthy went to work at his uncle’s petrol bunk in Chennai. Soon enough, the young lad’s earnestness and quick wit earned him quite a few fans. One of them, the then Home Minister of Tamil Nadu, the late Shri Kakkan, took a liking for the boy and organized for admission into the B.Sc program at the Govt. Arts College, Mount Road. The large-hearted Minister even arranged for scholarship for the young student.

After graduation, Krishnamurthy joined the Indian Oil Corporation Ltd where he became an active trade unionist. His spiritualistic leanings led him to volunteer for the Kanchi Mutt where he caught the attention of HH Jayendra Saraswati for his focus and efficiency in organizing events and programs for the Mutt. Little did he realise then that

his devotion and volunteering for the Mutt would lead him to a greater calling in life. By accepting the Acharya's diktat, Krishnamurthy was thankful for an opportunity to help millions of people in pain. His mother's passing away due to diarrhea and the feeling of helplessness and inability to save her life had indeed left a deep impression on the young lad.

SRI MATHA TRUST

Immediately on taking up the challenge, Krishnamurthy, then 55 years of age, rolled up his sleeves and went to work with complete backing from his family. He set up a public charitable trust with eminent trustees drawn from different backgrounds. He made sure that one of the trustees is a cancer survivor. After all, the principal object of the trust was to provide help to cancer patients. His goals for the shelter were clear-

- It should be a secular facility and be open to any patient
- Run a safe and clean place to stay
- Offer clean toilet facilities
- Provide good and healthy food

After continuous study and improvement and after much struggle, Krishnamurthy was able to achieve the above. Along the way, he had to fight perceptions about cancer-it took time for patients and guests at the shelter to realise that cancer is not contagious. Patients came from all over the country for treatment ranging from a few days to a few months. The patients come with an attendant who is usually a relative. Many a time the attendant has to go back because the treatment takes longer than expected, leaving the patient alone in the shelter for days or weeks together. Safety of the patients thus became a critical requirement which Krishnamurthy addressed with great care. Over the years, the shelter has earned a name for being a safe place for a cancer patient to stay. With pride he

narrates an instance where a young muslim woman from West Bengal came alone to Chennai for cancer treatment. Hearing that she was staying at the Sri Matha Shelter, her community members in Chennai urged her to move to the shelter that the community was running. The woman refused saying that she felt safe at the Sri Matha Trust shelter under the watchful eyes of "Appa" as Krishnamurthy is affectionately called.

Funding, a key factor in the successful running of the shelter has been handled with aplomb by Krishnamurthy. He has been able to show case the achievements of the trust and has won many hearts and contributions from individuals and institutions across the World. "If you do genuine good work, people will automatically come forward to help" is the mantra by which he lives.

As a result of his efforts, Sri Matha Trust today has a capacity of 100 beds and provides shelter and food to 300 people at any given day. All patients and their attenders enjoy the facilities free of cost.

Ambitious and accustomed to meeting challenges all his life, Krishnamurthy was ready for his next challenge. For that, he knew he had to broad base the team.

THE TRUSTED LIEUTENANT

In 2009, the editor of a neighbourhood news magazine "Mylai Express" had heard about the outstanding service rendered by the shelter and wanted to do a feature for the magazine. Meeting VK Sir was a revelation for Dr. Vijayasree, the editor of the news magazine. Her article titled "Manidharaa, Punidharaa?" reflected her genuine concern for the well-being of the cancer patients.

Impressed with her intellect and compassion, Krishnamurthy encouraged her to help at the shelter. As a young girl studying in Lady Sivaswamy School in Mylapore,



Vijayasree had engaged in social work for which she even got a certificate from the then Governor of Tamil Nadu. But nothing in her past held any indication of what she was about to do at Sri Matha Trust. Starting with weekend volunteering Dr. Vijayasree got more and more involved and started handling liaison with government, donors & patients. Finally, she handed over the running of the news magazine to another able friend and plunged full-time into the operations of Sri Matha Trust.

Proud of his protégé, Krishnamurthy, now "Appa" to Dr. Vijayasree too, narrates how he went to Dr. Vijayasree's house and asked her father "please allow me to adopt her". Initially shocked, the father however gave his consent on hearing the great work done by the shelter and her daughter's passion in helping cancer patients. Now, the entire family consisting of her

husband, two children, sister and many more are fully behind Dr. Vijayasree volunteering in one way or the other.

Sri Matha Trust, with a stronger team was now ready for the next big challenge.

SMCC HOSPICE CENTRE

The sad truth is that around 30% of cancer patients go to the terminal stage. The immense pain that the patient undergoes is compounded by the difficulty in providing care to these patients. Normal care was simply not enough. Her search for ways to help patients cope with this stage, led Dr. Vijayasree to study patient-care models from all over the World. The study revealed that developed countries have hospices to house and manage such patients.

Thus, it was decided that a hospice be set up for providing care to terminally ill patients.



To enable this, a separate trust called “Sri Matha Cancer Care” was formed. Here, the object was expanded to include patients suffering from any disease and not

cancer alone. The goal for SMCC is “pain-less and hunger-less death” for the terminally ill. A separate premises in Indira Nagar was taken on lease to house the terminally stage

patients. On launch, all hospitals in the city were informed of this facility.

The Dean of the Government General Hospital, Chennai lauded the move and responded by helping with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between SMCC and the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The Government started referring terminally ill patients to SMCC.

Hundreds of terminally ill patients have found comfort in this shelter and spend their remaining days with less pain. The trust faces immense difficulties in managing this facility. The outwardly appearance due to the physical manifestation of the disease is quite gross in most cases. Very few relatives come forward to stay with the patients inflicting huge mental trauma on the patients. This is especially true of instances when a patient finally succumbs to the disease. In many such cases, when no relative comes forward

to claim the mortal remains, Dr. Vijayasree’s father steps in and completes the funeral and other formalities and thus give an honourable passage to the deceased patient.

This humane outlook and the never-say-die attitude of Appa, Dr. Vijayasree, their team and family members have seen them surmount any obstacle that has come their way, even as they are readying themselves for another great challenge.

OWN HOSPICE

The dream of establishing a state-of-the-art hospice for providing advanced treatment comparable to the best-in-class around the world has seen the Trust acquiring a 4 ground plot at Thoraipakkam, a the Chennai suburb. This facility will have 50 beds and 10 dialysis machines

The project cost of around Rs. 5 crores is planned to be raised almost entirely through donations from the public – individuals and organisations. An individual contribution of Rs. 2,500/- will help build one square foot of the facility. If 20,000 well-meaning citizens come forward, the hospice will become a reality.

Krishnamurthy is confident and repeats “If you do genuine good work, people will automatically come forward to help”.

SOCIETY’S RESPONSIBILITY

While it is not fair to expect every citizen to attempt such extraordinary service to humanity, it is the responsibility of every one to support those courageous few who actually step forward and do.

Self-less service in providing shelter, food and care to cancer patients and thus making Chennai a preferred destination for cancer cure makes Sri Matha Trust ably managed by Krishnamurthy and Dr. Vijayasree a true Champion of Chennai.

K KALYANASUNDARAM

