



EDUCATION
**LIGHT AT THE END
OF THE ROAD**
V. UMAMAGESHWARI

'Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve lots of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of repression and resistance.'

-Robert Kennedy

This is true in the lives of Umamageshwari and Vasudevan.

While most of us associate Kannagi Nagar, the re-settlement colony off the OMR IT corridor with crime, violence, drugs & illicit activities, here is a couple, who in stark contrast dreams of producing the first IAS officer from the very same neighborhood.

We were extremely curious to meet Umamageshwari, a 6th standard dropout and her husband Vasudevan, an auto driver, to learn what instilled in them the passion to nurture and pursue this dream.

Born in the road-site settlements of Ice house Triplicane, Umamageshwari grew up experiencing and watching poverty in close quarters. From a very young age, she imbibed a sense of social responsibility. This was further fostered by volunteering in the activities of social service organizations. She often won accolades and prizes in several contests that were conducted in the localities close by. The greatest influence in her life is her father, a role model who invested his time and effort in social service, despite himself facing severe economic challenges. All this moulded and shaped Umamageshwari as a person with the determination to make a difference to the society rather than be bogged down by it.

Her journey in Kannagi nagar began after she got married to Vasudevan and moved in to this colony to establish her home. She could not help notice the grave suffering of families, women and children, devoid of basic amenities of food, clothing and

shelter. Uma and Vasudevan led a reasonably comfortable life with their three children until an accident changed their life in many ways. The first big blow to their life came when the children were thrown out of school due to their inability to afford their monthly fee.

Given her never-say-die attitude, she encouraged her children to spend the evening hours studying by themselves in the open. Little did she realize that it would be a big game changer for the children of Kannagi nagar. As days went by, without any prodding or prompting, she noticed more children voluntarily joining and enjoying the benefit of group study. Drawing from her childhood experience, Umamageshwari knew that feeding the children could prove to be a strong motivation factor for the children to make this a sustainable habit. She made whatever little food or snack she can and gave to the kids who came to study. Slowly, but steadily, the numbers grew from a mere 3 to 100. The multi-fold increase kept them on their toes looking for innovative and practical ways to manage this system of study.

It became imperative for the couple to set up a better structure to transform the initiative into a more formal study model. With the help of the community, they cleared out an identified area in 9th main road Kannagi nagar and converted it into a Study center. The children were trained to seat themselves under street lights on tarpaulin sheets during the study time in that open area. They then set-off identifying a few volunteers to teach. The team of volunteers divided the responsibilities amongst themselves to help the children in various subjects of study. They also slotted separate timings for junior, middle and high school students for improved focus.

Gradually, with passage of time, students who have graduated from this community, benefitting from the study center, have been coming forward enthusiastically to offer coaching support. Smt. Uma continues to cook food herself to feed the children





at least thrice a week. Her main point here is, the child's family has 1 less person to worry about for food. There are some altruists in the neighborhood who help with basic chores such as cleaning, washing etc.

Well-wishers and some social service agencies who have been observing the noble work of this couple and its impact are coming forward to sponsor amenities ranging from food, study material, to computer systems. What used to be an open air study center with the constant threat of disruption has now been converted to a large hall with adequate light and ventilation, thanks to a sponsor who supported this initiative. There are over 300 students that currently study at the Ambedkar Free Evening tuition center.

CHALLENGES

The couple have faced a multitude of challenges in this incredible journey.

In the initial days, they had to deal with skepticism on the intent of this initiative, considering that the couple comes from a background of absolutely no academic credentials. Thereafter, they had to financially

invest all their savings and mortgage their jewellery, sell the auto etc for running the basic operations and feeding the children.

Vasudevan recollects a few occasions on which he and Uma have waited at the offices of potential sponsors for over 10 to 12 hours pleading for financial assistance, and returning disappointed. What is commendable is how they coped with the challenges, including occasional threats to their lives, without letting this initiative die. Whether it is plying the auto at late hours for additional income, supporting the old and needy with free meals, continuous messaging and reach out for help, the couple seems to have endless energy and conviction in their relentless pursuit of the chosen cause.

IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE – ALBERT EINSTEIN

Encouraged by a wide reach established by the school and its impact in the community, Uma & Vasudevan started looking at other avenues to intervene and improve.

In the afternoons, they conduct several classes with the aim of empowering

the women at home. They impart skills in tailoring, embroidery, basket weaving etc. Interestingly, there are some classes with practical focus on business and presentation skills relevant to this society such as how to organize and present items for shops on wheels or how efficiently to string flowers and make garlands.

Health & hygiene is also a priority for the couple and hence they work with individuals and agencies to provide Yoga training, medical facilities for children and the older people in the society. They have also trained residents to grow their own vegetable plants. They lead by example.

With social responsibility as the driving force, the lack of formal education does not deter the couple in finding newer ways of serving the needs of the society.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

As we walk into the tuition center @ 5.30 in the evening, the first thing that strikes is the enthusiasm and joy with which the children of all ages arrive for the class. With fresh clothes, neatly combed hair, arranging their foot wear in an orderly way as they enter the hall, it is evident that the school has inculcated a sense of discipline in the children. The session begins with a loud and powerful rendition of the prayer sung in unison. The prayer reverberates the couple's dreams and seems a promise

by each kid to be that IAS officer of their mentor's dreams.

The volunteers who are around during the study time have developed a great rapport with the children. It is heartening to see the children operating on a self-driven mode and seeking for help only when required, allowing the volunteer the necessary space to work with all.

Ask the kids to show you their notebooks and it is mind boggling to see the quality of writing and more importantly the imagination and color of their work. The smiles and joy in the faces of the children in seeking our adulation and appreciation, is truly endearing.

As we hesitantly leave this highly energetic environment, we feel with certainty that Kannagi nagar's future is in safe hands and will surely see its destiny.

Hats off to Umamageshwari and Vasudevan, a couple who overlook their limited resources and have been confidently and relentlessly pursuing their dream of transforming the future of the children of the neighborhood. Setting a perfect example for many other Kannagi nagars, they are truly champions of Chennai.

Shanthi Krishna