

SERVICE *with* PURPOSE

SEVALAYA

Champion of Chennai – Social Initiative



Passion. Service.
Sustained. Revolutionary.
Empowering. Intense. Fire.



These words can summarize V. Muralidharan's resume in a nutshell. Better known as Sevalaya Murali, the moniker has been given to him after three decades of founding and running the organization Sevalaya, which works towards educating and improving the lives of the rural poor. Sevalaya was registered in the year 1988 as a children's home for orphaned and destitute children.

But the seeds for the cause were sown when he was 11 years old, by a book.

Mr. Murali elaborates the fascinating story. One of his seventh grade classmates' father was an author who had an amazing book collection. On one visit to their house, Murali got mesmerized by a set of powerful eyes looking at him from the bookshelf. Naturally he wanted to borrow the book, but the friend's father thought he was too young to understand it and was reluctant to loan it as he had lost a few books when people 'borrowed' but forgot to return.

But on noticing Murali's earnestness, the book was given on a 'return it in

24-hours basis.' It so happened that that day was Saraswati pooja and Murali's devout grandfather would expect the book to be placed with his other academic books for the customary worship. So Murali sneaked away to a quiet corner and flipped through the pages. It was a collection of poetry which, as his friend's father had correctly anticipated, couldn't be read in one day. So Murali decided to skim through at random and the page that opened his eyes was a poem addressed to Goddess Saraswati and spoke about how teaching a poor illiterate is the true meaning of education.

"That was a book of poems by Mahakavi Subramania Bharathi. And those fiery eyes were his. I knew that someday I would work toward giving free education to those in need." Says Murali.

Call it coincidence or destiny, two other books strengthened that resolve. Murali bought a book on Swami Vivekananda's teachings for paise 10 from the Ramakrishna Math, in the early 1970s. The message that stood out was how feeding the needy was the most worthy of services. And he added it to his bucket list of things to do.

Similarly, from a 20-page book that had assembled Mahatma Gandhi's constructive program for India, he read that developing a village was a holistic way to see a change at the grass root level.

"The 15-year old me was filled with an abstract mission on how to work toward eradicating poverty," says the older Murali, whose determination hasn't dimmed.

A group of 20 formed a "Vivekananda Association" in school and spent weekends visiting orphanages. They would volunteer time or pool money and buy a sack of rice for them. The more he saw the plight of the less fortunate, the more he knew he had to earn well, to make his dreams come true. So he focused on studying

and secured a good job at a software company.

The day he got his first salary, he opened a separate bank account to put away a small portion of it - to be used as capital investment for the institution he would start soon. He met his soulmate and future wife, Bhuvaneshwari, while in school and she shared the same ideals as his. It was easier to work toward their common goal. They got married in 1988 and the same year Sevalaya was registered.

And since then, steered by his vision of bringing about a social reformation, Murali's Sevalaya has checked off all three tenets - free education, orphanage and homes for elderly destitute and community development by organic farming, training them in waste management and generating bio gas. Their campuses run on solar power. Sevalaya also runs two free hospitals and conducts regular clinics for eye and dental checkups.

Sevalaya has a Community College for school dropouts. They offer a six-month vocational training program. In fact, the Thiruvallur magistrate sends junior delinquents to Sevalaya for rehabilitation. Sevalaya is now set up on a corporate model. There are different committees to spearhead the different departments and keep the cogs in motion.

"We take in kids at LKG level and ours is a State Board Tamil Medium School. Thanks to technological developments, and especially after the pandemic, our faculty know to use laptops, smart boards, doing zoom sessions etc. We have our own ERP system." Says Murali. But there is always a need for good teaching faculty especially for English, Murali informs. Sevalaya welcomes all offers to teach, even online mode. They are looking for tutors to prepare the class 12 children for professional entrance exams like engineering and medicine etc.

How can we, the general public, help?

All the facility they offer is free of cost to the inmates. They depend on individual and corporate sponsorships. Sevalaya has great schemes and welcome any aid - time, financial, books donation to the library etc. School and college students can volunteer through NSS programs or individually. Undergraduates majoring in psychology and sociology from Madras School of Social Work do projects with Sevalaya. They have an agreement with John Hopkins University, IIT Madras, Anna University and many more.

What is the emotional requirement faced by young kids when they enter Sevalaya?

“Kids look to Bhuvaneshwari and I as their parents. And the senior citizens consider us their children. We also perform last rite ceremonies, if there’s no next of kin.

At a recent sewing machine distributing event at the Gudalur center, the father of one of the recipients thanked the center head profusely for being patient with his daughter, a victim of domestic abuse. The once depressed girl, now has many plans for her future. These are moments that reaffirms their pledge to do more.

The alumni also give back in many ways. They sponsor a child, volunteer weekends with and twice a year - on January 26 and August 15 - they donate blood. Special mention must be made about Illayaraja, who joined when he was seven years old. He was encouraged to dream big and now holds a good position with Caggemini, based out of London, and is a Trustee of Sevalaya.

There have been many challenges along the way, including some negative press that got published in 2007, 2008. It was a stressful couple of years, and help came from many quarters. One of their long term donors called to say he was sending twice



his usual contribution as the negative reportage may cost Sevalaya’s inflow of funds.

“We can’t thank his generosity and foresight to back us like he did,” states Murali, who was called for enquiry. At the police station, one officer came up to him and started chatting. It turns out that his brother had studied with them.

When he found out the purpose of Murali’s visit, he gave an account about Sevalaya’s positive impact on kids, citing his brother’s case as a personal example to the enquiry committee.

Continuing the narrative, Murali says, “At the end of the session the only question I was asked was whether I wanted tea or coffee!”

Murali has bigger plans for the future, such as starting their own University.

Together with its staff, supporters, volunteers and well-wishers, Sevalaya is on an eventful journey to make a difference to the underprivileged.

Sarayu Sriram