

## **APPRECIATIONS – Mrs. Sriyani Nonis**

### **Tuesday, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2005 - Daily News**

Mrs. Sriyani Nonis was an extraordinary lady. It was almost 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 herself. 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 the differently abled 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 son Chris, her two daughters Nirmali and Shelley and having learnt of her eldest daughter Kshama, I knew and understood well, why she always appeared confident that they would continue both her business interest and her charitable interest with the same admirable values and principles she was known for. This was possibly why she exuded an air of contentment, at all times. From what I saw and learnt of her and of her family during my meetings at Mackwoods or at the always very pleasant dinners at her home-she was and had always been a very special mother. Her investment of quality time in them had paid dividends, she must surely have thought. She had every reason to be proud of them.

Thus, to my mind, she was a role model for leaders in professions or politics, leaders in business, whether in corporate governance or corporate social responsibility initiatives, men and women, mothers and fathers, young and old.

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 with respect and fondness. 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.

I had the privilege of getting to know Mrs. Nonis even more, in the latter part of the 1990's. 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 practising in London and I saw in him, much of Mrs. Nonis' character. I met him on many occasions later with Mrs. Nonis when their Group considered a particular initiative, close to the hearts of all of us. 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 an 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, punctual and polite, and never even remotely gave any one the impression that she was the daughter of the Chairperson of Mackwoods – she was unassuming like her Mother then and is just the same today.

The youngest daughter of the late Mr. & Mrs. N.S.O. Mendis, Mrs. Sriyani Nonis was born in 1938 on 23<sup>rd</sup> of December – her Father's birthday and he gave her his initials N.S.O. As a child of this visionary entrepreneur, 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 those privileges. She schooled at St. Bridget's Convent, Colombo until the age of 12, and thereafter at boarding school at the Convent of Holy Child Jesus, Combe Bank in England.

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., and also appeared before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Lord Chancellor Lord Dilhorne, Hon Sir Malcolm Hilbury. 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 Shelendra continued this tradition by qualifying as a Barrister-at-Law also of Gray's Inn, thus becoming the third generation of lawyers in the family, continuing from her cousin, Chief Justice H.N.G. Fernando, to have been called to the Bar, from Gray's Inn. Although she ultimately built her career in the corporate sphere, she remained interested and active in the legal field and was elected President of the Sri Lanka Women Lawyers Association in the early 1990's

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

Mrs. Nonis 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 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 female 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 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 the tremendous outpouring of grief was a reflection of the deep affection they had for her.

Internationally, she was the Honorary Secretary of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, and august British Association, dealing with International Affairs, during the Presidency of Lord Denman, and chairmanship of Sir Donald Hawley, under the patronage of the Duke of York.

There are many who speak about the rights of women, gender equality etc. Mrs. Nonis exemplified this in her position of being amongst a handful of female professional leaders in the business sector. She was instrumental in drawing attention to the need to, give greater recognition and empower women and was committed to the role of professional women in our society in her capacity as 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. In this context, one of her proudest moments, was when her daughter Nirmali, achieved the milestone of being elected the first female president of the National Chamber of Commerce of Sri Lanka, earlier this year.

Her passion was to espouse the cause of those in need. From our meetings and conversations over the years I came to realize that she had a unique approach to corporate philanthropy.

She was at all times mindful of preserving the dignity of the recipient, and this she achieved by not publicizing 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 over hundreds of individuals at grass roots 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 thought Sri Lanka.

She was also a Trustee of the Joseph Vaz Trust – committed to educational and self-help projects, island wide and a council member of the national Council for mental health. She herself made time for the parish Sunday SVP sale in aid of the homeless and destitute, she herself took the time to talk to those in need.

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

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 to 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.

There were letters that I would like to quote from – D.H. Panadiker, Chairman – International Life Sciences Institute – India, recalled: "Mrs. Nonis was a very dynamic person and combined in her, the virtues of compassion, leadership, friendship, cooperation, humour and excellent business sense". former president of Smith Kline Beecham International, Mitch Cybulski wrote: " She was one of the kindest and most graceful people we have ever know" an

appreciation by her school friend Surani Fernando clearly defined her thus- " she inspired everyone she came across, as someone who understood and valued people as well as business in equal measure.

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."

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. 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 Nnis was an extraordinary lady- yes she is a role model for all....