

## **Mrs. Sriyani Nonis: A Role Model for All**

### **Tuesday, September 12th 2005 - Financial Times**

Mrs. Sriyani Nonis was an extraordinary lady. It was almost a decade ago that I first met her. My first impression, 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 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 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. 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 excellences, do not have measure for: thus, to my mind, she was a role model for leaders in the professions or politics, leaders in business or 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 pour 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 is the first time that I have paused in my work to write an article about someone I knew. 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 an 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. Though the complex discussion 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 and 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 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 she 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' eldest daughter Kshama, 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 get 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 those privileges.

## Her career

After qualifying as a barrister at-law at the honourable society of Gray's 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 Sheldra continued this tradition by qualifying as a barrister-at-law also of Gray's Inn.

Her entry into 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 sad demise in June this year: established in 1841, it was Ceylonised in 1956 by Mrs. Nonis's 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 woman in Sri Lanka to hold the position of chairperson of a plantations company. Agalawatte Plantations Limited. It was under her chairmanship that Mackwoods made the bold and far-sighted move of bidding for management of this plantations company which she successfully turned around within 2 years of management, and subsequently acquired the controlling interest. She was keen about the creation of value 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 projects 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.

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. She worked hard for it. She was president of the Sri Lanka women lawyers association and vice president of the Zonta Club of Sri Lanka, member of the women's chamber of industry & commerce and the business and professional women's association. One of the proudest moments, was when her daughter Nirmali achieved the milestone of being elected first woman president of the national chamber of commerce of Sri Lanka, earlier this year. For Mrs. Nonis and Mackwoods they would have been practicing good governance perhaps long before the first code was written in England. 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 father, (the Mackwoods Mendis 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. To her; the 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.

I was deeply touched to see how Shelly held very close to her a scrap book of several events of Mrs. Nonis's 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 underprivileged. 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 interests was truly inspirational and she never lost her sense of humour. Her wide ranging interest 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, Shelley, 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....