



YouthForce Carries on Dr. Ari's Legacy
Dr. Ari Ariyaratne & Niven and Tiara Ganegama
Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka

Nestled at the foot of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve, about three hours outside of Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo, is the small village of Kalawana. It is one of Sri Lanka's eight UNESCO World Heritage sites. With thousands of unique species of birds, flowers, medicinal plants, and animals, this island nation is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world—and this is its most biodiverse village.

Kalawana's children grow up to know the names of the native plants and animals: it's part of their rich heritage. There are majestic eagles, hawks, peacocks, and jungle fowl; gorgeous Blue Lotus, tender pink Naa leaves, and 25 varieties of butterflies; giant squirrels and leopards, and even recently even a black panther. Local people are proud of the lush soil that grows their famous cinnamon and Ceylon tea, as well as powerful medicinal plants like turmeric, curry, aloe vera, and hibiscus, their "welcome" drink.

One day Kalawana's teacher reached out to the *Sarvodaya*, a charitable humanitarian organization, and asked for help. The Sarvodaya is often asked to help Sri Lanka's 2.1 million people, especially those in remote areas. And when asked, they do their best to do whatever they can. Since its founding in 1958, the Sarvodaya movement has spread to 15,000 villages in 26 districts, reaching over 800,000 villagers all over Sri Lanka. They have built 5,000 preschools and 7,000 bridges, held 100,000 peace marches, organized 100,000 water programs – and benefitted 7 million people. It all started when Dr. Ari Ariyaratne held the first *Shramadama* camp. His idea was simple: "We build the road, and the road builds us," he explains. He began his values-based teachings of teamwork, volunteerism, mutual respect, and action amongst the poor.

In this case, the teacher wanted her students to learn to speak English. Dr. Ari's wife Neetha shared the teacher's request with her teenage grandchildren, and they were eager to help. Tiara, 16 years old, and Niven, 13, were born in the U.S. They knew that speaking English could open doors to a whole new world for these children. Their grandparents had taught them to always help others, especially those less fortunate. In fact they had recently joined the Sarvodaya's children's workcamp in the nearby village of Nimalagama, and were surprised to see that the children had smartphones and Wifi. "Just imagine if they could learn English," Niven thought. "It could be life-changing!"

Over the years Niven and Tiara had heard stories about their grandfather's amazing journey around the world – from India, where he visited Gandhi's birthplace; to meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the U.S. and then India, to Europe, Asia, and the U.S. They'd seen photos of him at the White House with First Lady Hillary Clinton, as well as with Dr. King's wife Coretta, and other leaders. They'd watched videos of him proudly sharing Sarvodaya's work at major conferences with people like Deepak Chopra, Ram Dass, Joanna Macy, and Jack Kornfield. And they'd heard how he'd spoken to 650,000 people in Malaysia with Bhante Mahinda. They'd also heard stories about how others sought their grandfather's counsel. Before founding the Nobel prize-winning Grameen Bank, Dr. Muhammad Yunus had traveled from Bangladesh to learn from Dr. Ari how his microcredit programs were empowering local people. And in the early days of the Peace Corps, the founders had met with Dr. Ari to learn about Sarvodaya's impressive volunteer movement.

While he frequently walks among world leaders, Dr. Ari is a simple person, with a simple message for how to empower local people. When tourists visit Colombo, they wonder how the streets are so clean. Dr. Ari tells about how his first project there inspired local shopkeepers to clean their streets, and how that instilled in them a sense of pride. Niven

enjoys the story of how his grandfather, at 14 years old, had started a cooperative to empower local coconut shuckers to eliminate the middleman and receive a fair wage for their hard work. No matter where he went, Dr. Ari's message was always the same: by awakening one person, it could lead to awakening a whole family; then an entire community; and then, one day, even the world.

Sarvodaya is now the country's largest community-based NGO: it has comprehensive programs in maternal and early childhood education, community health, rural technical services, woodworking, international volunteers, and partnerships with the Institute for Higher Learning; in disaster management, and Deshodaya's self-governance program to engage ordinary citizens in consensual politics, and to promote democracy, good governance, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. At last year's 60th anniversary celebration, people from all over the world traveled to Sri Lanka to honor Dr. Ari's great work.

For Niven and Tiara, the Peace Marches Dr. Ari led are especially memorable, since they happened around the time they were born, in 2007. For more than 30 years a civil war had plagued their beautiful country. Dr. Ari and Sarvodaya had mobilized millions of people to take a stand for peace. They worked alongside the brave soldiers who gave their lives for this noble cause. For his constant message of inspiring people to live together in peace, Dr. Ari became known as "the Gandhi of Sri Lanka." Niven and Tiara moved back to Sri Lanka from the U.S., and lived safely with their families and friends.

Dr. Ari is happy to see his grandchildren enthusiastically embark on this project to help children learn English. He is tickled with their resourcefulness, and he is proud of the new club they have started: YouthForce. Niven is president of the club: he knew he needed a good organizer, so he asked his sister Tiara to be vice president. His 15-year-old cousin Sanara is an aspiring author: Niven asked her to be the club's secretary. Established in 2019 YouthForce has now grown to 20 members. For a year they collected supplies - books, pens and pencils, stationary, coloring books - and raised funds to buy ecofriendly cloth bags. Then they traveled to Kalawana from Colombo to deliver them. Everyone was grateful for their support.

Next, Sanara recorded the cellphone numbers for all 35 children, and each YouthForce member picked two children to sponsor. Now they call every weekend to check on their progress. They ask them: What did you learn? How did you practice your English this week? And these 5-10-minute phone calls in English are changing their lives.

Like his grandfather, Niven has a twinkle in his eyes. When he was about 9 years old, people started to see his grandfather's spirit shining through him. The second-youngest of Dr. Ari's 12 grandchildren, Niven is now growing into a youth leader. At 13, he is helping to organize Shramadamas like his grandfather taught him. He organizes tree planting projects, partnering with youth groups like Interact. He leads the prayers and songs; most importantly he acknowledges each and every one who helped create the project.

YouthForce is now envisioning a major tree planting program. Niven, Tiara, and Sanara have seen how climate change is affecting their country, especially in the rural areas. Landslides, beach erosion, oppressive heat waves, and extreme and unpredictable weather changes are affecting farmers' crops. In Sri Lanka the forest cover has been reduced from 50 percent to just 20 percent in just 10 years. The children's favorite beach is gone, left with only rough rocks along the shore.

In 2004, Sri Lanka was ravaged with its first tsunami. Over 30,000 people died, and thousands lost their homes. Immediately after the storm, Dr. Ari texted Sarvodaya's 26 districts and set up partnerships between those who had weathered the storm, with those whose villages had been destroyed. For its rapid response and organized relief efforts, Sarvodaya won the U.N's prestigious Award for Tsunami Rehabilitation. As part of their rehabilitation program, they had built a comprehensive Eco-Village for homeless families that is now a model of sustainable living.

YouthForce wants to help protect these villages using its own resources. They've heard the legend about their grandfather's birthplace, where King Hanuman is said to have lifted a whole mountain to find the powerful medicinal herbs underneath. Dr. Ari's grandchildren are deepening their appreciation for their country's biodiversity - and they realize they must do whatever they can to help preserve and protect it. From scientists they've learned that "big trees" are the best - since they help regulate the climate, the *water cycle*, and provide precious shade in the heat, *while* creating vital habitats for creatures. "Every day, the Kalawana children walk among these big trees," thought Niven. "Why not

invite them to collect the seeds from these trees off of the forest floor? Then we can bring the big tree seeds from the forest to Colombo for their next tree planting project."

Niven and YouthForce traveled to Kalawana for the Sinhala New Year in April. "We organized speakers, instructional games, and fun activities - all in English!" he says, enthusiastically. To encourage more people to join and support them, they created a short video describing their project. Niven is grateful to everyone at Sarvodaya for their support, especially Sarvodaya's liaison to YouthForce, Yamuna Balasooriya for their special support. They've found a host family for a Sarvodaya volunteer from England, who now lives in Kalawana and works with the children. Last week the village teacher called Neetha to say how motivated the children are. They were getting good grades, too. The teacher predicts that soon the number of students being tutored will have doubled. The whole village wants to learn English!

Now 88 years old, Dr. Ari enjoys being at home, where photographs of his grandchildren's smiling faces adorn the kitchen wall. To them, he is "Seeya" (grandfather). His home is always open to any children who come by to visit. They too call him Seeya. "We must listen to our young people, and help to awaken their potential," says Dr. Ari. "They have some great ideas, and they need our support."

Niven loves sharing stories with his Seeya about his project, about the children in the forest who are learning English. He treasures just sitting by his grandfather: listening, watching, and learning. He hopes that one day he will grow into his grandfather's shoes. For now he proudly "stands on the shoulders" of those—those in his family, and *all* those—who have dedicated their lives to the Sarvodaya. "I'll never forget my grandfather's message," Niven says. "Awakening, caring for others, sharing our gifts, carrying on his legacy."

At the end of every Shramadama, they sing this song.

*May there be seasonal rains
May the harvest be bountiful
May the minds of all beings be peaceful
May the rulers be righteous.*

*Let's spread boundless loving-kindness to the entire universe, towards all living beings
including humans, animals and plant kingdom.
Having universal thoughts of loving kindness to entire humanity
irrespective of cast, creed or religion and acting with this universal vision
is the only way to get through this challenge.*

Dr. Ari Ariyaratne

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<https://www.sarvodaya.org/>

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www.stonesoupleadership.org
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