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KARUNASHRAYA
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From the Editor's Desk

Rtn. Kavita S Kekre

Dear Rotarians and Anns,

When I embarked on this journey of discovering Karunashraya, I did not expect the kind of emotional roller-coaster I would be traversing. The knowledge of how it all began with PP Rtn. Dr. S N Simha and then how PP Rtn. Gurmeet Singh Randhawa took it upon himself to make it a permanent project. The philosophy of care and compassion, the challenges, the people behind the project, the architecture et al.

I was simply overwhelmed with what I was hearing. And I wanted this story to be told. This is when I came up with the idea of interviewing Doc Simha and Gurmeet and dedicating a special edition of SEVA for Karunashraya. I discussed this with our President Dr. Srikanth and he immediately and whole-heartedly supported the idea.

To do the honours, I roped in Vidhya Pradeep and Narsi to ask the questions. And what we heard was nothing less than surreal. The aspect of palliative care, the concept of a hospice, the thought of creating a 'space' for terminally ill Cancer patients, and the mere thought of managing 'death' was enough to give anybody goosebumps. We were not immune to the same.

Friends, with great honour and pride, we bring this Special Edition of SEVA. This Special Edition would not have been possible without the tremendous help and support I received from Dr. Srikanth, Vidhya and Narsi.

And above all, I would like to thank Doc Simha and Gurmeet for so endearingly agreeing to do the interview and enthusiastically talking about their journey. Their narration was so vivid that the three of us (Vidhya, Narsi and I) almost 'lived' their experience.

I sincerely hope and pray that after reading the journey of Doc Simha and Gurmeet, you will also be inspired to do 'something' for Karunashraya and its temporary inhabitants. I would request you to come and spend some time at Karunashraya.

Yours sincerely,

Kavita S Kekre
Editor



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Introduction

October is a significant month, not only for the world, but for Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar (RBI) too, as the World Hospice and Palliative Care day is celebrated. This year it falls on the 10th day of the tenth month. The reason behind its significance is not hard to find. After all, our flagship project, the Hospice at Karunashraya, has set, and continues to set new standards in the field of palliative care. This is a day which pledges to celebrate and support action on hospice and palliative care, all over the globe. And, at RBI, what better way to acknowledge the occasion than by hearing from the pioneer hospice warriors of Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar, Rotarians and Past Presidents, Dr. Nagesh Simha and Gurmeet Singh Randhawa, their journey towards creating one of the more enduring hospices in the country.



The SEVA team had the opportunity to have a conversation with both these stalwarts, and what a treat it was to listen to their experiences. The quest to setting up the first hospice in Bangalore was never smooth; the journey, however, was liberally peppered with serendipitous events, which are nothing short of miraculous. And we couldn't have chosen better raconteurs than Doc and Gurmeet. Their reminiscences on the early days, right from the time when the idea was a mere seed, had us totally captivated, and were definitely goose-bump worthy.

So, without further ado, we bring to you this engrossing narrative that was shared with us.

The Origins

SEVA Editorial Team: The vision for the entire project seems to have come from you, Gurmeet. In fact, it would be apt to call you the architect of Karunashraya, as far as RBI is concerned. You were the initiator of this project, and this finally came to fruition due to a multitude of events neatly falling into place. So, can you recount how this actually took place? There is an interesting anecdote of how you, Doc and Mr. Kishore Rao were travelling together in a car, and that was the spark. Can you tell us more about this?

Gurmeet: I think Doc will be the best person to tell us how it all began.

Doc Simha: One fine Sunday morning in 1986, in the lush surroundings of the Bangalore Club, Lalit Sawhney, who was then a member of RBI, arranged for me to meet with Mr. Manohar Row, his boss at HLL, and a friend of Manohar Row, Mr. Kishore Rao. They had started the Indian Cancer Society (ICS) in Karnataka, and they wanted us to ideate on the activities that could be undertaken under this banner. I suggested a host of activities that could be taken up and ideas that could be implemented. Soon after, the ICS set up Cancer



detection centers at St. Martha's Hospital. By the time I took over as the President of RBI in 1989, ICS had started conducting cancer detection camps. During my year as President, RBI funded some of these camps, as part of their projects. This gave me an opportunity to meet Kishore Rao regularly, and in fact, once, even on a flight, we ended up seated next to each other! Kishore kept propounding his idea of setting up a hospice in Bangalore. So, when Gurmeet became the President a few years later, and he was keen on RBI taking up a larger, and more permanent project, this seemed like a feasible project. The ICS was also, at this point, keen to partner with RBI on this.

The Inception

SEVA Editorial Team: What was the inception of the thought that gave you the idea of creating a permanent project for Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar?

Gurmeet: We wished to be different from the other Rotary clubs and wanted to make a mark in the Rotary world. When I became President in 1993-94, I was keen that we take on a larger, more permanent project, befitting our position as the best club. Something had been buzzing inside me to take on a significant project. We were doing all routine projects like blood donation camps, bus shelters but I wanted to do something different, something permanent, which would make a difference in the lives of people who didn't have the luxury of being looked after. So, this was a very niche kind of requirement.



Doc's idea of a hospice, at that point, seemed almost predestined. Cancer was at the top of my mind and the thoughts were largely triggered by the fact that my mother was under treatment for cancer (co-incidentally under Doc) and this was one of the driving motives. However, we did not have much clarity on the scope of the project. So, the first few meetings that we had with Kishore helped us get a better understanding of a hospice, how other hospices functioned, and what this would entail for RBI. Kishore and ICS were initially under the impression that RBI would just be helping out, but we clarified that we would participate as equal partners.

We were aware that it being an ongoing project, the Club would also be required to assess the consequent financial implications. At a meeting with PDG Uday Kumar and the future Presidents of the next 3-4 years, they expressed their general anxiety and concern on how the Club would be able to manage a project of this magnitude and the recurring expenses involved. I assured them that as far as possible, we would endeavor to be self-financing and not be a burden on the Club. And it is a matter of great satisfaction that, other than this year (due to the unprecedented circumstances), we have managed to be so.

Even today, I cannot imagine that our total yearly outlay is 6 crores. When we started off, I thought it would be maximum a couple of lakhs. Never did I imagine that we would become so big and the project would have such far reaching implications.

The Journey Begins



Once the approval was through, the Joint Trust was set up with five trustees each from RBI and ICS. Post this, Doc, Cyrus and I attended the Asia Pacific Conference on Hospices in Singapore, in the hope of getting a better understanding on how hospices function. We had the good fortune to meet Dame Cicely Saunders, the pioneer of the new hospice movement. We also visited hospices in Singapore and met people in that space. The trip was an eye-opener and the knowledge gathered was invaluable in designing and setting up Karunashraya.

The late K P Bhasker, who was very supportive of our endeavors, visited Shanthi Avedana Sadan, a hospice in Bombay, which is situated on the sea

front. The vastness of the sea and the effect of this vista on the patients sowed a germ of an idea in him, and was

thus born the beautiful, soothing water elements in Karunashraya. Over the years, this has proven to have had a very tangible, beneficial effect on our patients. So, all thanks to him!



The building was taking shape by this time, and slowly the other elements began falling into place. The BHT had started functioning from the premises of Rotary Bangalore – TTK Blood Bank, and in March 1995, the home care services started – with a single nurse, a counsellor (Usha Shinde) and a hired auto rickshaw - and visited the homes of the patients and consulted with their doctors. This was our first experience dealing with such patients. Interestingly, Shekar, who was the first to offer the services of his auto on hire, is still with us.

In fact, there is an extraordinary snippet on how the Sisters of the Holy Cross came on board with the nursing staff. When Kishore Rao approached the nuns at Bangalore, their initial response was in the negative. However, within a few minutes they agreed to provide 10 to 15 nurses. Unable to believe his luck, Kishore Rao enquired as to what made them change their minds. It turned out, that earlier that week, while reviewing their plans for the future, they unanimously decided to, like Mother Teresa, do something for the dying. And that was when Kishore Rao went with his request, As Doc Simha states, it was nothing short of “an act of divine will”.

Health, Hunger & Humanity – 3H

Doc Simha: From RBI’s perspective, the next significant event was the approval of the 3 H (Health, Hunger and Humanity) Grant. Dr. Richard Woof, a palliative care physician based in UK, visited our building construction and our work in home care, after hearing much about it from Gilly Burn, a nurse from the UK, equally passionate about palliative care.

Richard wanted to meet up with me. The same day, PP Ajit Rai had organized an avenue meeting and fellowship at his home, and it seemed the perfect venue to meet with him. Richard was so impressed with our fellowship that he promised to see how he could help.

Richard’s father had died of cancer, and the family had established a trust, which was administered by his Rotary club. On his return to London, he committed an amount of £ 5,000 for propagating palliative care. And this paved the way for Rotary Club of Farringdon and RI District 1090 becoming our partner in our application to Rotary Foundation of Rotary International for a grant under the 3 H program.

We were fortunate to be awarded a grant of Rs. 65 lakhs in 1999, which funded the equipment for Karunashraya. RBI, under the then President Ajoy Chakravarthy, played a significant role in obtaining the grant.



Gurmeet: In 1998, while on a personal visit to the US, I met Ken Miller at Evanston, the HQ of Rotary, and had the opportunity to discuss the project with him. I also met Ramesh Pai, RI Director, who was very positive and encouraging. From there, I flew to the UK, where along with Doc, we visited Rotary Farringdon, our partners in the 3 H program, which led to a visit to the Rotary Club of Shrewsbury. There we were introduced to Ben Bazely, who was instrumental in stitching together another Act of the Universe. He brought us in contact with Penelope and Dr. Jeremy Johnson. Jeremy was born in Bangalore, and it seems only fitting that he would be the one involved in our Hospice. From then on Penny and Jeremy have been abiding friends and mentors of our work here. He has often visited to train our staff, and our sisters have been sent to Shrewsbury for training at his hospice.



The journey from Bangalore to Singapore to Bombay to Evanston to Farringdon to Shrewsbury, has been incredible. When we envisaged this project, our entire budget was Rs. 3 crores. And now, our annual budget itself is Rs. 6 crores, with an additional outlay of Rs. 6 crores for a new building. We never visualized, even in our wildest dreams, how far this would go. It is mindboggling when I think of the number of lives that have been impacted. It has been a life changing experience for me. Witnessing death at such close quarters, and the compassion of palliative care, has been extremely humbling.

Funding

SEVA Editorial Team: How did you manage to collect funds when the budget was 3.5 crores and the Global Grant had given you only 65 lakhs? How did you make good the balance?

Gurmeet: We had zero bank balance and we were at the mercy of Rotary TTK Blood Bank for a place. Whatever money we were getting was used for the counselor and paying for the auto rickshaw. When we envisaged commissioning a 50 bedded hospice at the beginning itself, people cautioned us about our lack of funds; and recommended that we build in phases. But we wanted to go the whole hog. At this juncture, Kishore Rao helped us in getting a lot of funding for the building and it was a joint effort.

Doc Simha: The very first committed donation for hospice, of Rs. 10 lakhs came from IDBI. Then Rajendra Karnawat helped us in getting Rs. 20 lakhs from a friend. ICICI gave us Rs. 8 lakhs and that's how we started getting funds.

And through our Rotary link, even the architects Chandavarkar and Thacker, both Rotarians with Rotary Club of Bangalore and Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar respectively did not charge anything for the entire project. And so, one by one people started contributing and we were able to manage and the 3H grant helped us in procuring the equipment.



An Architectural Marvel

SEVA Editorial Team: What was the philosophy behind the architectural design of Karunashraya? The open spaces, the water bodies, it exudes so much of peace and serenity.

Gurmeet: Kishore had visited Shanti Avedna, a hospice in Mumbai and had found that the patients were very happy. One of the reasons for it was that the hospice overlooked the Arabian Sea. He realized that a view over water was very therapeutic. Kishore gave this brief to the architect's firm Chandavarkar and Thacker. Sanjay Mohe and Naresh Medappa were the young associates who were assigned the project.



The idea of water had to feature strongly in the plans. It also had to be a meditative kind of space and water seemed almost sacred and central, so the building was planned around a quiet pool to create a special tranquility. We also wanted to create an environment where the patients would be able to experience the air, sunlight and nature and of course the water. The view of the outdoors was necessary, so that the patients would be able to come outdoors, in a wheelchair if necessary.

Here I must mention that K P Bhasker was “our” person and he would spend hours in the open, supervising the work. Sadly, Bhasker fell ill in his later years and came to Karunashraya as a resident. He died in the same surroundings he had helped create.

Other Challenges

SEVA Editorial Team: What are the other challenges you faced?

Gurmeet: Oh! We faced a lot of challenges. Our biggest challenge was nursing. We were wondering, who would take care of the nursing department. But providentially, we got Sister Blaise and she was a gem. Sister Blaise was sent for training to Shrewsbury, UK. When the hospice started, she set up amazing nursing standards, such as compassionate palliative care, competent nursing and that set up a very strong base as nursing is 90% of what goes on in palliative care.



KARUNASHRAYA, A NON-PROFIT PUBLIC CHARITABLE TRUST, IS A HOSPICE THAT PROVIDES COMPLETE CARE (FREE-OF-COST) FOR ADVANCED STAGE CANCER PATIENTS.

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Growth of Karunashraya

Gurmeet: We have grown tremendously. From one doctor, we have now become a team of 5-6 doctors; from one counselor to six counsellors. We have strengthened our nursing also and on the home care front we have three teams going out. Home Care is at a standstill because of the pandemic.

Doc Simha: Gurmeet and I have been trustees for the last 26 years. Past Presidents Rtns Ajith Rai and Piyush Jain are doing a fantastic job. We would like our Rotarians; our new members to take more interest and play an active role in Karunashraya so that we can have a viable succession plan.

Expansion Plans

SEVA Editorial Team: What are your expansion plans?

Gurmeet: We have started a new building for palliative training and research wing called the **Karunashraya Institute of Palliative Care Education and Research (KIPCER)** along with the OPD. At present we have a restriction on in-patient care, so the expansion was inevitable. We wanted a separate block for KIPCER as we didn't want to disturb the current in-patient care which anyway was not sufficient with the growing numbers of patients. Today we have 120 staff members whom we are not able to accommodate in the existing block.

Doc Simha: KIPCER has links with Manipal University and NIMHANS. We have an MoU with NIMHANS, and Manipal University and we are recognized as a PhD center in palliative care. Three of our staff members; two counsellors and one doctor have registered for a PhD. We are working with the Government of India. I'm on the National Task Force. We also have an MoU with the Government of Karnataka to support them.

The Impact

Doc Simha: The impact that Karunashraya has made in Gurmeet's and my life cannot be expressed in words. Neither of us would have taken up this project if not for the strong support of Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar. All that I would like our members to know is that Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar has been a great catalyst in something very significant and they must know what a wonderful project we all are involved in. I would also like to add here that Karunashraya is a must visit place for Rotary VIPs and many RI Presidents have seen the project and talked about it. So, the bottom line is that Karunashraya is playing a major role not only in our country but also internationally in palliative care.

Before I conclude, I would like to reiterate again that if Rotary Bangalore Indiranagar has taken up this project, it's only because of the vision of the then President Gurmeet Singh Randhawa.

Even during COVID, he has been going to Karunashraya thrice a week. A salute to his commitment and passion.



Our Heartfelt Gratitude

SEVA Editorial Team: Life is extremely precious. Every human being has the right to live to the fullest and enjoy his/her time on Earth. But unfortunately, some human beings have to suffer.

The disease of Cancer can destroy lives not only of the patients but also of the near and dear, the kith and kin of the patients. The most troubling aspect of this entire journey for the patient is the pain.

It is surprising that many patients are not alleviated of their pain and suffering during their treatment. Karunashraya is a place where a Cancer patient comes when there is no longer any hope of survival.

And at this stage, the best treatment that Karunashraya, that absolute **abode of compassion**, offers, is that it allows the patients to leave their bodies with dignity and without pain.

Karunashraya not only deals with the physical pain, but also with the emotional pain, provides psychological counselling, social counselling, financial counselling, and spiritual counselling.

People have been Baptized, marriages conducted, beauty make-overs organized, hallucinations of loved ones dealt with...the stories of compassion and care are endless.

Though we would never wish for anybody to endure pain and suffering, the disease of Cancer is a reality. The silver lining to this proverbial dark cloud is that there exists a place called Karunashraya where anybody with such pain and suffering can live their last few days/weeks with peace, tranquility, serenity and dignity.

We salute the people who tirelessly and selflessly work at Karunashraya and provide the patients care & compassion; along with **Doc Simha** and **Gurmeet**, who have been the pillars of strength at **Karunashraya** for the past 26 years.



Thank you for being a hand of solace...



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