



Centenary Tribute of Love to Joan De Mel

This year 2021 April 21st marks the 100th birth anniversary of our beloved **Joan De Mel** who founded Sri Lanka Sumithrayo. She is our mentor & her selfless passion towards a social change has inspired & touched us all. Though her soul is free in the blissful realms beyond this world since 27th December 2008, leaving behind her daughter Penny and son Nick, the love and care she showered on the Sri Lankan community lingers on still through the emotional support we provide to the needy. She will always resonate in us through her beautiful example.

Joan De Mel, being a British citizen, came to Sri Lanka in 1971 & married Bishop Lakdasa de Mel. Since then, the large family of her husband & warm hearted Sri Lankan friends made Joan to adopt Sri Lanka as her home.

The behest of a doctor who has seen four attempted suicides in one day in his ward at the General Hospital, prompted Joan to establish Sri Lanka Sumithrayo for suicide prevention with the full support of her husband & with the assistance of a steering Committee comprising of Dr. Wijerama, Nalini Ellawela & Munsoor Ghouse. This organisation which began in two rooms in Deans Road, Colombo as a branch of the world wide organisation of Befrienders in 1974, later moved to operate in the ancestral property of Joan's husband in Colombo 7.

Assorted men and women from all walks of life, were selected for being caring & loving people to work voluntarily without any remuneration. All were trained to express this care in a way that may help others in a less fortunate situation. Joan was a strict disciplinarian and aptly trained the Volunteers to give emotional support to those who are despairing, depressed and sometimes suicidal and also to befriend any person who is emotionally disturbed or upset.

Organisation's ethics confine to complete confidentiality between the callers and the volunteers who meets them; volunteers are not allowed to discuss religion or politics. The service offered is completely free of charge; no obligations are entered into, and no moral judgements are made by the volunteers. Tender loving care is still a panacea for many of those who feel that they can't cope with life. Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity does help to comfort the caller. Befriending is 'being' there for a distressed caller, encouraging the caller to pour out all their feelings & listening constructively by accepting them nonjudgmentally and by showing an empathetic, compassionate response, rapport to help the caller to relax and dissipate some of the tension. Just an empathetic look does help.

Whist talking together, the caller relieving all that has been stressing and the volunteer saying little, but conveying understanding, give some relief to lessen the immediate stress. From that position, the volunteer may then verbalize some of the options available taking into consideration the family/ financial status etc., of the caller exclusively, in order to help the caller to relieve the immediate agony. It is just putting together unhappy, distressed people with a trained friendly, empathetic listener to accept certain unpleasant situations non-judgementally. This empower the callers to handle their situation in their own manner. Those who have shared their emotional problems may return, when a new difficult situation occurs, seeking help.

Our organization has a Drug Demand Reduction Programme which is housed at ‘Mel Medura’ in No. 60, Horton Place, Colombo7 – promoting a healthy lifestyle free of harmful substances, distress and despair.

Joan was always happy & contented that some people are alive today & are living happily as a result of contacting us. However, Joan was shattered when her husband Bishop De Mel passed away. To get over the emotional stress after his death, she authored a book titled "**Lakdasa de Mel: God’s Servant, World Citizen’s Son**". What an appropriate title to honor him!! This empowered her to bounce back to life. She also authored a book “**Closer than the Brother**” explaining in detail how she founded this organization amidst many hurdles.

Joan did not interfere in the management of our organization. Joan was not egoistic seeking name, fame, power or position in return for the invaluable service mooted out by her in founding such an organization for our country with many such regional centres thereafter. Moreover, she continued to be a humble volunteer with us till her last days. She was so simple kind, caring & adaptive without any pride whatsoever that she was the founder. It's a rare trait that could be found in a person.

The confidential emotional support in Sinhala, Tamil and English without any charges whatsoever continued since then & is still available all 365 days (including all holidays) of the year from 9 am to 8 pm.

Joan guided the destiny of Sumithrayo till she departed with her generosity and her passionate commitment to help those in distress. She made her premises and land at her home in Horton place available for the services Sumithrayo provided. Almost all her income was made available to charity and her own lifestyle was simple and uncluttered.

We at Sumithrayo are eternally grateful to Joan De Mel for being an example by leading an exemplary life inspite of being the founder & for leaving a legacy which will be treasured by us in particular & by the community at large.

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