

Dr. T Varagunam-a personal tribute to a great human being Appreciation

February 10, 2018, 5:21 pm

On the morning of Sunday February 4 while we were with a few friends in Diyatalawa, we got the sad news that Dr. Varagunam, known affectionately to his friends, as "Muggy" is no more. Deep sadness at the loss of a great person whom we adored and looked up to filled our hearts and minds. We immediately got in touch with his wife Thayalam who described to us the last few days of Muggy's life.

Within a short time we were on our way to Kandy with our friends, to be with Thayalam. On our way driving through the scenic climbs of Uva and Nuwara Eliya we recalled with sadness the beautiful and memorable thoughts associated with the good times we have had with Muggy.

From the early part of his career in Kandy in the 1960s, Dr. Varagunam had initiated a number of activities and given leadership to many developments, some of which have evolved into great institutions. He achieved greatness in many spheres including professional, academic and management areas, and many will address his accomplishments in time to come. When he was working for the Special Programme on Research and Training in Tropical Disease (TDR) in WHO, Geneva, and since then, we maintained a close relationship with him and Thayalam. They visited us in Colombo and Diyatalawa and we spent time with him in Geneva, London and in Kandy. We have traveled together and had countless discussions with him, which were always stimulating. During those times Muggy shared his life experiences with us – which we savored as important life lessons.

Below we focus on personal, family and social aspects of his life as we saw them during our relationship with him over the past 30 years.

True simplicity, compassion, integrity, generosity, empathy and virtue he had in abundance. He was always willing to help others sharing his vast experiences. He treated everyone with respect and did not expect to receive special rewards from those in power. A hallmark of his personality was moderation. Even during the most critical of discussions on issues he would draw our attention away from extreme views and anchor them in the middle. The "middle path" he did truly tread. The Peradeniya medical school had a special place in his heart, and he did much for it even after his return to Sri Lanka. We being products of the University of Colombo consider ourselves tremendously privileged to have been able to associate with him in our professional lives. When we needed it we could always expect honest, sincere and informed advice from him. Whenever we spoke, even on the telephone, he would enquire about all members of our family. He cherished his independence – in thought and life; to the extent that towards the latter part of his life, he even fiercely insisted on taking decisions on the management of his own medical condition - possibly, to the dismay of many doctors attending on him!

A man of great intellect Muggy kept up with new developments in all fields including on information technology, medicine, education and social development. He looked at any issue in an objective and

rational manner, yet his scientific thinking was made more humane by his caring and compassionate attitude towards others. His sensitivity to social and cultural issues helped him to understand and resolve issues at a practical level. He continued to read extensively to keep his sharp mind intact in a wide range of areas. Towards the end of his life he wished that even his care giver and attendant be an "intelligent" person"!

Muggy was a family man with close relationships with his nuclear family including his grandchildren. He had a wide circle of friends in Kandy and overseas and kept in close touch with them at all times.

Muggy did not limit his activities to medicine alone. Since he returned from Geneva he gave leadership and took an active role in developments in many areas thus sharing his experience and expertise with the younger generation of professionals. In the nineties he was associated with and chaired many discussions leading to the establishment of Health Development and Research Program in the University of Colombo. At the time of establishing a medical education centre in the Colombo Faculty in the early nineties it was he who suggested the inclusion of research as part of the proposed centre, thus the new centre was named Medical Education and Research Centre. Muggy played an important role and gave the necessary support to the development of healthcare and medical ethics activities initiated at the University of Colombo with the collaboration of the Centre for Medical Ethics in Oslo. In 2001 Muggy developed a National Mental Health plan for Sri Lanka, which was supported by the World Health Organization. In the following year he chaired the first International Conference on Community Mental Health in Sri Lanka, organized by the National Council for Mental Health and later edited the proceedings for publication.

Muggy was, like many, saddened and disappointed with some of the negative developments in medical practice, medical education and professional services in Sri Lanka and where possible he clearly expressed his dissatisfaction and disapproval. However he never allowed these disappointments to interfere with his personal life and social relationships - instead he maintained a very positive outlook on life. He distanced himself from people and activities, which did not meet his standards or concur with his own personal values. He was a happy person and lived his life sans grudges or enemies.

We consider ourselves very fortunate to have associated with this great person. It was always an enormous pleasure to be in his company and he was also a source of strength.

While bidding good-bye to Muggy we convey our deepest condolences to Thayalam, and his daughters Radha, Mira and Sita and their families. May the greatness of Muggy influence many more people.

Nalaka and Kamini Mendis