

Unsung Heroes - Nirmala Raniga: Woman of Distinction

by Michelle Hopkins, Mehfil Magazine July/August 2008

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "Infinite striving to be the best is man's duty; it is its own reward."

Nirmala Raniga lives by these words. For nearly two decades, she has committed herself to helping drug addicts get clean. Raniga broke ground in the field of addiction rehabilitation by demanding that people in methadone programs be treated with respect. Individuals fighting addiction face enormous challenges and deserve compassion, not moral disdain or manipulation, she says.

As executive director of Lower Mainland Drug Freedom Inc., a private organization that provides methadone treatment programs, this humble dynamo oversees five offices, 24 physicians and 25 employees. The program is unique and is about to expand with the Paradise Valley Wellness Centre, a residential treatment centre that will provide a safe, supportive environment for 48 patients. "It's been my dream and vision to open a world-class holistic centre and this fall we will open," she says. "Eventually, we will have two houses and we plan to build a yoga and meditation centre as well."

Spend time with Raniga and you soon realize her work is more than just a career for her; it's a calling. She was recently nominated by her staff of doctors and counsellors for a prestigious YWCA 2008 Women of Distinction Award, which recognizes women whose achievements contribute to the health and future of the community, in the category of Business and the Professions.

"I was honoured but I had a lot of anxiety over it," says the intensely private Raniga. "I can't do what I do without the support and dedication of amazing people."

Psychiatrist Dr. Jeffrey Buttle, whose specialty is working with drug addicts, says the recognition is no more than she deserves. "Nirmala is quite committed to working with substance abusers; those who are usually ostracized in society," he says. "She is a compassionate and caring person and she could work anywhere but she has chosen to work in this very difficult area. "Nirmala saw a need in a very disadvantaged part of our society and her primary focus is on them."

Raniga is passionate about doing whatever she can to help eradicate the stigma attached to drug addiction. "There are so many inspirational stories and I just wish the public would understand and not judge," she says. "Recovery is a journey with many ups and downs, and I'll never give up on someone who needs my help." Raniga's journey to her vocation began 20 years ago. Born in Fiji, she is one of nine siblings from a closeknit and religious family.

"I had never had any exposure to drugs and if I did see drugs in school I stayed away," she says. "When I was asked to help set up a clinic in the late '80s I said yes. I'll never forget the first time I met a hardcore addict, but I just saw a person who needed help. I saw someone struggling and I didn't feel afraid."

In the late '80s there was only one methadone clinic in the Lower Mainland, she says. "There were very few services available to addicts who wanted to get clean. When you point a finger at people who are suffering they don't want to get better. We want clients to take responsibility for their lives, but we also want them to feel worthy and respected."

When she's not working, Raniga donates countless hours to the Shree Mahalakshmi Temple and is an active member of the Soni Cultural Society.

At the end of the day, seeing the positive changes in people's lives is what inspires her to do what she does. Raniga speaks with pride about some former clients who now work in her clinics. "Five of our clients who successfully got off drugs now work for us. Some went back to school and now work as counsellors or volunteer for us ... in fact a couple of them have been working for us for more than 10 years."