

Profile of Courage: Manjula Rajapaksa

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Hon. Secretary PRISL

Here is the story of a person, who sold home-grown vegetables and ran a small tea shop to support his family in his school days, later reaching the pinnacle of entrepreneurial success and making his mark in Sri Lanka's flourishing plastics industry.

I could not think of a better title for this article than the above, which I coined burrowing through the pages of *Profiles in Courage*. It's a 1957 volume of short biographies describing acts of bravery and integrity by eight United States Senators, authored by then Senator John F. Kennedy, who won the Pulitzer Prize for the work.

There are many outstanding personalities in Sri Lanka who have served as game changers in the rubber and plastics industry in the country and reached the pinnacle of success.

As William Shakespeare said: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." The same is true of professional success as well. While some are born with the proverbial silver spoon, some have success thrust upon them by sheer luck and a third category of people achieve success through hard work, persistence and perseverance, going through all the blood, sweat, tears and heartache involved in climbing up the ladder.

It's no exaggeration to say that Manjula Rajapaksa belong to the third category of people who trod the road to self-made success with rare distinction.

Manjula's career in the polymer industry, spanning a quarter century, is a narrative of hard work and determination. Over the past 59 years, Plastics and Rubber Institute of Sri Lanka (PRI) has been instrumental in grooming several key personalities, who have since made immense contributions to the national economy. This year, the Institute is proud to honour Manjula Rajapaksa, one of its illustrious working products.



Humble beginning

Born in 1974 at Dunuwela, a remote hamlet in Ruwanwella area, Manjula had a humble beginning in life. His father was an employee at the Cooperative (Samupakara), while his mother was a housewife attending to family chores. His father died in the very same year in which Manjula was admitted to a village primary school in 1980.

Thereafter the responsibility of bringing up the children fell on the fragile shoulders of his mother, who struggled to eke out a living by selling "kadayappam" and doing a little bit of farming. This had an indelible impression on Manjula, who was the eldest of his parents' four children.

Manjula passed the 5th Std Scholarship in 1985 and got admitted to Tholangamuwa Central in 1985. His life in the school hostel provided him with an opportunity to learn the rudiments of self-management, with the little scholarship money he used to get. In order to assist his family, he used to do trivial jobs such as selling home-grown vegetables to the lorry going to the Negambo Fair during weekends, and this way he was able to fulfill some of the requirements of his family.

Manjula successfully completed the GCE OL with Credits in all subjects and in 1993 he completed ALs in Agricultural Science. His leadership qualities came to the fore even during his school days when he served as the Class Leader and the Head Prefect of the Science Section and was also a member of the Buddhist Society. He also ventured into running a small tea kiosk after doing his ALs.

Dawn of a booming career

Call it fate or coincidence, Manjula's career started in 1994 as an Assistant Production Supervisor at the Lalan Rubber Glove Factory at Danowita, Warakapola, where Mr Jayawardana, the Factory Manager, was an alumnus of his school. We sometimes need the helping hand of an associate or friend to make a head-start in life and Manjula was fortunate to have such a grooming from Mr Jayawardana.

During his tenure at Lalan, Manjula had the opportunity to work with Dr Gamini Seneviratne, the then Director of the Rubber Research Institute of Sri Lanka (RRISL), in the installation of the company's Effluent Treatment Plant.

Manjula was also greatly inspired by Mr Lalith Hapangama from whom he learnt many valuable lessons in entrepreneurship. This motivated him to start a small rubber wood treatment unit to provide brush handles to Harris Brushes.

His baptism in the plastics industry occurred in 1998 when he got involved in the setting up of the Lalan Polythene Factory at Warana. He considers this as a rare opportunity to get deeper insight into the problems and challenges in the plastics industry.

His association with the PRI dates back to the year 2000 when he did a Certificate Course in Plastics Technology. He reverentially remembers the guidance given to him by Mr Dheersekara in polythene extrusion which later became his forte. In 2004, he did a one-year Diploma Course in Ingrin Institute in order to sharpen his knowledge and skills.

Evolution of an entrepreneur

Manjula's foray into the challenging and exciting world of entrepreneurship started in the year 2007 when he purchased some old equipment and started a small poly bag factory in an abandoned rice mill at Yattogoda in Kegalle with only two people. He started supplying to the SMEs and in the process learnt the crucial importance of customer relationships. He won the IDB Entrepreneur Award for

2008/2009 in Sabaragamuwa Province. By then he had 15 employees.

Manjula hit another milestone in his entrepreneurial career in 2012 when he set up Clean Packaging (Pvt) Ltd, as a state-of-the-art triple laminate factory, at Galigamuwa Industrial Zone. Its current client base includes John Keells, Raigam, Bahira etc.

The ensuing years saw the gradual expansion of the factories. His Yattogaoda factory now has on its roll 40 employees, while the Galigamuwa factory has a workforce of 160. He still retains 10 of the employees who were with him from his humble beginnings.

He also established an environment-friendly custom-designed furniture company called No Wood in 2015. He always used to stress the importance of maintaining good relationships with the banking sector which was one of the secrets of his business success.

His business enterprises won many accolades for outstanding performance, which include the Shrima Abhimana Sammanya in 2012, Best Entrepreneur at Deyata Kirula 2015, and the Best Entrepreneur Award of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in 2017. Clean Packaging is among the first 10 companies of its kind in Sri Lanka.

Manjula got married in 2002 and his wife is a teacher. They have two children who are studying in Kegalle.



Pursuit of perfection

In keeping with the dictum that it's never too late to learn, Manjula is committed to enhancing and expanding his professional knowledge despite his official preoccupations, and is currently following a HND in Industrial Management at the University of Colombo. He has plans to do his post graduation and also an MBA.

He currently serves in the Council of Management of the PRI and is an active member of its Exhibitions and Events Committee. He is a member of the Lions Club of Galigamuwa and is actively participating in Buddhist activities.

Manjula envisages diversification into innovative and environment-friendly technologies while improving the



social and economical development of the employees. He is pursuing this goal with a missionary zeal.

A collage of four images illustrating industrial processes. The top-left image shows workers in a factory setting. The top-right image displays various rubber products, including sheets and blocks. The bottom-left image shows a worker holding a clipboard next to stacks of black rubber products. The bottom-right image shows a machine processing rubber into sheets.



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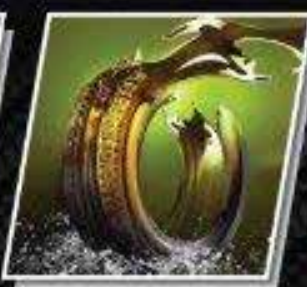
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