

'Light To Life' To Help Educate Youth In War Torn Areas



'Light to life' is a Community Social Responsibility project on a global scale which aims to educate children and youth in war torn areas through vocational training. The project was initiated by Rotary International District 3220 Sri Lanka, in partnership with JWT and Mindshare Colombo to provide those directly affected by almost 30 years of war.

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Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Thayalan Bartlett, Chief Executive Officer of JWT Colombo briefly outlines how the project was initiated. "We knew that there were many people and organisations offering immediate relief to Sri Lankans directly affected by the war, but we felt that there was a need to do something on a sustainable level. This is when the inspiration to launch Light to Life came into being".

Endorsed by the Vocational Training Authority of Sri Lanka and in partnership with Rotary International District 3220 Sri Lanka, JWT and Mindshare Colombo aims to build a fully operational Vocational Training Institute in the North of Sri Lanka in Kilinochchi, to provide youth with a future through learning. “We thought education in masonry, carpentry, air conditioning & refrigeration automobile engineering, IT, English and various other skills would give youth opportunities and they would have definite objectives in their life”, explained Thayalan.

The Vocational Training Authority has already offered a plot of land in Kilinochchi for the project and the construction for the building. Thayalan says, “Since we launched the project, a lot of people have contacted us for details. We are also receiving contributions from people in Australia, Europe, US, Canada, Singapore, Qatar, Indonesia and many other countries. We are receiving donations from villages in Sri Lanka through money orders and it shows that people want to genuinely help irrespective of their ethnicity. UNOPS heard about our project and wanted to partner Light to Life. They are a credible global institution and have the expertise to go to affected areas to establish projects of this nature.”

‘Light to Life’ aims to collect a sum of Rs 25 million or US\$ 215,000 by December 24, 2009. The official web portal for the project www.lighttolife.lk is one gateway to make contributions. Thayalan says “The website is a hub of information with a cyber Christmas tree with 24 levels and a star. Each level corresponds with the first 24 days of December. Each layer is worth Rs 1 million or US\$ 10,000.”

“What we ask is for corporates to take one level for Rs 250,000 or US\$ 2500 and challenge their staff members, business associates and partners to contribute the balance to meet a target of Rs. 1 million per day” , he added. “Any individual can make contributions from as low as US\$ 1 or Rs 100 upwards. Keeping in mind the global crisis, we didn’t want to burden people with large donations and kept the minimum amount affordable. So each bulb on the cyber Christmas tree is priced at US\$ 1 or Rs 100. So when you donate this amount, you light up one bulb,” he says.

Three local corporate giants Dialog, GlaxoSmithKline (Consumer), MAS Intimates, as well as JWT-Asia Pacific, have already lent their unstinted support to Light to Life.

Commenting on JWT's involvement and commitment to a project of this nature, Thayalan says, "JWT is a global communications company and it's important to know that this is not JWT's Corporate Social Responsibility programme but in fact a CSR programme which we call 'Community Social Responsibility', which gives people and companies worldwide the opportunity to be stakeholders in an initiative. As a corporate policy, JWT actively works for communities it engages with everyday on behalf of its clients' brands. We are of the fervent belief that building a strong and independent community promotes social progression and builds sustainable markets for brands and companies to coexist. We want to make our contribution to a new Sri Lanka by offering youth the opportunity to be self-employed and self-sufficient", he continued.

Over 60 individuals and organisations have contributed up to Rs 65 million by way of their time, talent and media space to launch this campaign. Many celebrities, including Kumar Sangakkara, Muttiah Muralitharan, Mahela Jayawardena, Ashanthi and Randhir, promptly came forward to endorse the project.

'More than a dream' is a song written by Chandini Rajaratnam, ECD and Vice President of JWT, and was produced in all three languages by Damian Wikkramatillake. Some of Sri Lanka's most prominent singing sensations including Damian Wikkramatillake with Soul Sounds, St. Joseph's College Choir and The Revelations, Sunil Perera, Gayan, Sajith, Samitha Mudunkotuwa, Georgy, Dushan and Krishan, Mahinda Kumar, Siva Kumar, Nithya, Nilukshi, Siranjeevi, Prashanthini and were involved in singing the theme songs.

Thayalan concludes by saying, "We think everybody in the country has a role to play; the government has played its role effectively and brought a conclusion to the war. We can't expect the government to provide all the benefits the country needs. The private sector also needs to take leadership to build the infrastructure and help in some way. To be a competitive nation, we require a large infusion of infrastructure, education and the creation of opportunities. What we're trying to do is like a drop in the ocean, but this drop will make a huge difference. I hope more companies and individuals will come forward to be a part of it and donate."