

'Somawathie Akkage Kade'



From a small mud hut boutique to a supermarket in Waragoda, Kelaniya, Gunadasa and Somawathie Kariyawasam have built their family business through instinctive business acumen. 54 years in the business that began with a few rupees in hand, today the Kariyawasam family runs the Neluka Supermarket like a well-oiled machine. Better known as 'Somawathie Akkage Kade' the shop continues to draw a loyal following of customers. With six daughters in the family, two of whom remain with the supermarket, their business continues to flourish. Gunadasa Kariyawasam shares their story of success.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara

Photography Damith Wickramasinghe

Can you talk about how you started your business?

I left my home in Galle with just 2.65 rupees in hand. When my brother got married and left town, I wanted to leave as well to get married to Somawathie who was in Dalugama. I was 18 and she was 13 and we got married without consent as her parents did not know who I was.

When I first left my village I worked for a very small amount and earned 15 rupees for the whole month. I did not waste that money by spending it on cigarettes or alcohol. I only spent five rupees for essential needs. The remaining 10 rupees, I would save it in the post office savings book. I managed to raise those savings and there is still money in that book to this day.

We started business 54 years ago with that, 2.65 rupees. Per day we could sell only five or six to a maximum ten rupees worth of goods. Usually these goods back in the day were priced in cents. One kilo of rice was forty cents, sugar, B onion and wheat flour were 28 cents, while a salmon tin was 95 cents and a condensed milk tin was one rupee and ten cents. Those days the business was very slow, as people didn't have the money to buy goods.

We began business, selling greens. Four bunches would cost just ten cents. Even then no one would buy as people did not have money. We started this business to make ends meet as we did not have jobs. At the beginning there was only a small mud hut at my wife's home town in Dalugama. That was where we started the first shop. We had six children and all of them are daughters and today two of them remain involved with the business.

While I was away buying produce for the shop, my wife stayed at the shop and managed everything and the shop in Dalugama became known as Somawathie Akkage Kade. Today we have a successful business. We have built houses and bought land. At one time we had 17 vehicles, buses and lorries; some we hired out, but we have sold them all now.

Can you talk about how the shop evolved as a family business?

Our daughters didn't further their education, they too naturally came into the business. By watching my wife and I, they learned how to sell goods and measure goods, how to talk to people and treat them well. That is why I am proud to say that today they are able to live comfortable lives without any shortcomings. Even

though our beginnings were small, today I can say that our family is one of the most successful in the Gampaha District.

Without higher studies or any other support or jobs of their own, they all managed to succeed through their own strength.

Back then our children didn't know how to address customers or treat them well. They were as young as eight or ten and there were times they would become impatient. On those occasions, we warned them that if customers stopped coming we would not be able to sell the goods. That is how they learned gradually and came all this way.

At present two daughters handle the business. The other sisters took on other businesses once they got married and went elsewhere. They are all doing very well.

One Of The Main Reasons Behind Our Success I Believe Is Learning To Talk To People Well. You Should Be Respectful. That Is How You Start And Even Sell Goods To Customers.

Today Neluka Supermarket is well known amongst the community. Could you talk about the strengths behind your success?

One of the main reasons behind our success I believe is learning to talk to people well. You should be respectful. That is how you start and even sell goods to customers.

If you talk well and be truthful, you create trust. Then you can get as much goods as you like. Our parents have taught us that if you cheat someone, you will win only for that moment. Afterwards you lose. If you gain something from a bogus bargain you will become a loser. You must also learn to think how you yourself will feel if someone cheats you. If you understand this, you will not deceive others. Nothing compares to the success that you achieve through the strength of good qualities.

I went to school for two weeks in the first grade and I only know how to sign. If I had studied, may be there is much more that I could have accomplished. Although I did not get an education, I learned from talking to people. Aside from Sinhala, I learned Tamil as well and a little English. I learned how to sell goods from watching others talk in different languages. No one taught me anything. I can talk to anyone who comes to our shop. I won't ignore any person because my

observation skills have taught me how to handle anyone.

Sometimes when I travel to Colombo to purchase goods, I would have to wait for hours for people or lorries to come. In that time I would watch how people communicated and that is how I learnt. For 20 years, I developed skills just by watching those around me.

I would go on the bicycle with a box attached and bring goods in small quantities. Everything was brought in small quantities. At that time, there was no one who could beat me at cycling. I would leave early morning to go to Negombo and return by late morning with fish.

Money is not what you need to get things done, but a good brain and speech. If you watch your tongue, you will find that there is always room for you to do business. If you work sensibly and have a command over your words, no one will chase you away.

Today people go after treasures. If you ask me where the treasure is I would say it is in Colombo. If you build trust amongst the business community, the treasure is all yours. You should use your mouth and brains to mine the treasure.

Today we can even purchase goods on credit. We can bring in as much as we want, this is because of the trust the name carries.

Could you talk about how the shop evolved to a supermarket?

Back then at the first shop at my wife's village, we had a lot of goods as there were no other shops around. We had to keep goods in the house as well. After we came here we had to eventually close that shop down. Still people come looking for Somawathie Akkage Kade even though the supermarket is named Neluka. People from the surrounding areas wait for our stocks to arrive and they still know the shop for its old name. Those customers who used to go to Dalugama Boutique have come here now, looking for our supermarket. They know that if they buy from our shop they will get good products.

Even today if we go to Colombo and say we need goods for Somawathie Akkage Kade they will simply ask 'is this enough?' It is on this trust that we have developed and have become what we are today.

Today People Go After Treasures. If You Ask Me Where The Treasure Is I Would Say It Is In Colombo. If You Build Trust Amongst The Business Community, The Treasure Is All Yours.

We had a great variety of products back when the children were still schooling and helping out after school. This included fresh produce and other consumer goods. I would go on the bicycle to sell fish while my wife stayed behind at the shop and that is how the business grew. Today we have all the essentials of a supermarket.

What are your plans for the future?

I might be a simple man still wearing a sarong, but at age 74, I can still take on any competition. □But now I am very satisfied and □I have no expectations. I don't want anything as I am now very comfortable. All I do is engage in charity work and do meritorious work. I give away clothes and other goods. I have given enough for my children who have everything they need. So now I give to those who do not have much. Moving in a different direction □several years ago Somawathie and □I began renting out a building as hostel premises for university □students. The facilities at this □private hostel, 'Soma Guna Mahal', are provided for a very low fare for the welfare of the students.

As for our business, we have handed everything over to our □children and we only offer our support. Now we do not need money we do not have anyone to earn for and don't have to spend for our children to become □doctors or anything else. They have □all found their places in life.

Even today we continue to support our children with the Supermarket. Somawathie still sits at the shop. Interacting with people is part of our everyday lives; it is second nature to us.

