

Sri Lankan Born Shanaka Fernandoâ€™S Rise To Australian Hero



Bohemian, flower child, free spirit. These are all caps that fit Shanaka Fernando’s tousled mop of hair, but this trail-blazing and altruistic restaurateur who turns forty this year, certainly has his heart in the right place.

By Raine Wickrematunge

Whilst in Colombo he came under the theatrical spotlight, in Melbourne Shanaka is better known for his innovative ‘pay what you want’ philosophy at the Lentil As Anything restaurants he runs. This ethos together with other compassionate and caring community projects he is involved with, won him the Local Heroes Award on Australia Day in 2007. Along with recognition has come more projects and

restaurants and 2008 is already proving a busy year for Shanaka and his band of staff and volunteers.
That Shanaka has opened his heart out to one and all, that every stranger is his friend, is startlingly obvious from the very entrance to his bric-a-brac home. Red writing on a white board near the front door proclaims, 'This house is never locked (the back door is open) feel free to make yourself at home – Friend/fellow traveller.'

Despite the 'open invitation' Shanaka has never had anything stolen from his home. "It is about trusting," he says, "and anyway, who would want an old record player?" Not just a record player though, there are two rusty push-bikes leaning precariously on the backyard wall – pushbikes being one of the man's passions. He once found an abandoned bike on the St. Kilda beach, so on a whim, he rode all the way to the Tullamarine Airport with just a change of clothes in the front basket, got on board a plane bound for Colombo, and landed, bike and all, at the Katunayake Airport.
He rode to his parents' home at morning light, stopping to buy rambutan from a wayside vendor and paying with a five dollar note as he didn't have any Sri Lankan currency on him. He arrived at his parents' home in Thimbirigasyaya, much to their surprise.
It's this refreshingly out-of-the-box thinking that has seen Shanaka's face appear on the Australian stamp, and his biography printed in the 'Whos Who in Australia 2008 Edition'. Despite his success however, his down-to-earth mentality remains untouched, with Shanaka still driven towards the ideal of equality for all. The man who created history in the restaurant industry and changed GST law in Victoria, now looks forward to opening his sixth vegetarian restaurant in Melbourne.
Writer, actor, restaurateur, humanitarian, community worker, friend, fellow traveller…the list could go on and on.

Shanaka, you run several successful restaurants, you are very much involved in several community projects and you have been applauded and honoured on a national level. Tell me where this story began for the young Shanaka Fernando who arrived in Australia 19 years ago and what was the inspiration that drove him?
Whilst growing up in Thimbirigasyaya in Sri Lanka, even though my parents were well-off, I wit-nessed first-hand the social inequities and unfair segregation. We had this slum down the road from where we lived and the inequalities were obvious. My father and his peers didn't get to experience the culture and the support these people (slum dwellers) could offer each other. As a youngster, I felt strongly that the suffering of these poor people wasn't fair, that they shouldn't be marginalised just

because they lacked knowledge of the English language. I believed that everyone must have the basics of food, shelter and clothing.
When I came over to Australia several years later, I was attracted to social justice and studied law for a couple of years (which I later abandoned). I then spent some time travelling around the third world and enjoyed cultures that didn't rely on money for their basics, learning great lessons from some tribal cultures and places such as Vietnam. For instance, just because someone is poor or a hippie doesn't mean they don't have something valuable to offer, and also that a hippie has to realise that just because someone wears a business suit he isn't necessarily hard-hearted. I thought more and more about creating a space without barriers and boundaries where anyone from any walk of life could feel comfortable and accepted. That is how the idea of Lentil As Anything began.

Interesting name Lentil As Anything. Where did that come from?
The inspiration was the Aussie band Mental As Anything. The idea is that we are not particular about who or what participates on this journey; we are open to all. Anyone as Anything..Lentil as Anything.

And today you have three Lentil as Anything restaurants operating.
Yes, and this year that number doubles to six, when we open restaurants in Chapel Street, Federation Square and the Collingwood College canteen. The last one is going to be something of a challenge, the idea of introducing nutritious and affordable food to a school in the form of 200 meals a day is going to be interesting.

It certainly is. So what is your staff structure?
We have 150 people on our staff and about 200 volunteers.

Lentil As Anything restaurants serve only vegetarian food. Is this a very personal thing for you?

I am a vegetarian but I don't preach it to others. I am not one of those placard-waving types who would go to animal rights protests or anything. I believe in being compassionate though, and also I must say since we don't have much financial capital as big organisations go, it helps to be a vegetarian concern. Also being a vegetarian restaurant has helped us overcome many rules and regulations in the food industry.

Your restaurant philosophy attempts to defy a money-driven consumerist society which many would have written off as sheer madness. How and

why do you believe your idea became a success?
I guess just by focusing on simple things and being stubborn; standing my ground with scary institutions such as the tax department. When we were battling tax laws, our argument was, we are making food available to everyone, so how can we be doing something illegal?
Our persistence paid off with the tax office and after a four year battle, GST legislation in this country was changed to say that any organisation that is non-profit motivated and has no fixed prices for its wares doesn't have to be part of GST.

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And what does the success of Lentil as Anything say about patrons who can pay whatever they feel the meal was worth?
It says that when people are given the responsibility, they tend to act responsibly. When you put your trust in people you tend to see the good side of them.

Lentil As Anything offers assistance in many forms to its members and the greater community. What is the process a 'needy' person must follow in order to receive help?
All one has to do is come and ask. We do not measure anyone's needs by any special criteria. A wealthy man battling isolation may be as needy as a refugee from a war-torn country.
Needs are wide and varied. Someone may need funds to get into a soccer team while another may need assistance with paying rent. We have many people coming to our crisis assistance centre where at the moment we have a young Canadian boy, an African boy, and a Scottish lady. We also have a driver training programme for Sudanese refugees.
One day of the month we have members of the blue-clad Victoria Police coming to our Abbotsford restaurant to cook for the Sudanese refugees. This is an ideal opportunity for them to get to know each other and appreciate each others' cultures and situations in life.

How does your refugee mentoring programme work?
We have a programme whereby refugees are given hospitality training and receive a certificate at the end of it. We also run a breakfast club for newly arrived NMIT students.

Tell me about your passion for promoting the arts?
In Sri Lanka I was involved in plays, both acting and choreography and acted in plays such as Fame and Guys and Dolls. I was also into writing and performing poetry. In Melbourne I worked with the St. Kilda Theatre Council's Mayhem Cabaret. In 2003 I took part in the Comedy Festival where I did Refugee the Musical in which Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed come to Australia in search of freedom (and someone says 'Freedom is next to Ikea.') So I am very much interested in the arts and believe that we must help those up and coming or amateur artists and give people a chance to showcase their work whether it be good or bad.

Lentil As Anything's philosophy celebrates compassion, individuality, and artistic expression. It challenges and defies a money-driven consumerist society. What is your personal philosophy in life?
Just to open myself up to others and continue to learn that difference is a good thing and not threatening.

Last year on Australia Day you won the Local Heroes Award here in Victoria for your pioneering efforts and humanitarian work through the Lentil As Anything family. What did this award mean to you personally?
That simple things can be powerful. Lentil as Anything is not a powerful organisation in terms of size or financial clout but the message of openness and trust stood out. The fact that I won this award out of 3,500 nominations says that there must be something good about keeping things simple.

What does 2008 hold for you personally, and the restaurants, in the form of goals, plans, and advancements?
As I mentioned earlier, we are doubling in size this year to six restaurants. The Australia Day Council has invited me to give about 100 talks to various government and non-government organisations about the experiment and its results. This philosophy of Lentil As Anything has been taken on board and we have formed some good links with people from Human Services and Immigration Department. This year I would like to see us cross a few more bridges into the mainstream – become a bit more sustainable. I have received a lot of offers interstate to start restaurants but at this stage it is not possible because if I start something I'd want to spend a bit of time there, at least the first few months. I am also an Australia Day ambassador and am being flown to Kit Island to make a speech there. I will also be part of the Youth Leadership conference in the Northern Territory.

You pursued a near-impossible dream and achieved great success. What

would your advice be for those who have an unusual dream but do not follow through because of fear of failure?
If it is simple and it is unselfish, and is in the interests of developing the greater good of society, then it will work. Being who you are as much as possible is also important. Young people must be en-couraged to not be scared of being unusual – we need a little more unusualness. **www.lentilasanything.com**

Pictures – Shanaka Fernando receiving Australia ‘s Local Hero Award from Prime Minister John Howard – The Award recognises Australians who make a real difference in their local communities and whose outstanding contributions enrich the lives of those around them.