

HOME NEWS SNAPSHOT

To Sri Lanka with love

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

MAY 9, 2019



VICTORIA DAVIS

Members of Madison's Sri Lankan community raised relief funds and signed a card for the victims of the April 21 suicide bombings.

Cavinda Caldera and Sumudu Atapattu watched their home country get torn apart by years of violent civil war. When the Sri Lankan conflict ended 10 years ago, they thought the worst was over.

But both flashed back to the war on April 21 when nine suicide bombers struck in Sri Lanka, killing more than 250 people at three Catholic churches, three hotels and a home in three different cities. An extremist group, National Thowheed Jamaath with ties to ISIS, claimed credit.

“That Sunday morning I was still asleep and my wife woke me up saying there were bombings back home,” says Caldera. “I didn’t understand at first, I couldn’t believe it. I thought I had misheard.”

“We were all getting very comfortable with the end of the war so people were going about very freely,” adds Atapattu, director of the UW-Madison Law School’s Research Centers. “But when something like this happens, memories of the war come back.”

Wisconsin’s Sri Lankan community is small. Caldera estimates that there are only about 50 or 60 Sri Lankans in Madison and another 100 who live in the Milwaukee area. In the wake of the bombings, they all felt helpless and isolated. So they organized a dinner at Christ Presbyterian Church on May 1, with the help of Sarvodaya USA, a Madison-based branch of Sri Lanka’s largest crisis relief nonprofit, to raise money for victims and share in each other’s grief.

“Being so far away from home, this is one of the few things we could do from here,” says Atapattu. “I knew there would be a big turnout, but I didn’t expect this many.”

Ten minutes into the event, the dinner line wraps around the room twice, as about 200 people wait to pile their plates with fried rice, chili-powdered chicken, lentils and spicy potato salad. “Everyone made sure to tone down the spice,” says Caldera. “Otherwise you’d start to perspire after the first bite,” adds Caldera’s wife, Bonnie.

Shevanthi Hettiarachchi, an artist who helped make fried rice and chicken, says she and others “are still in shock.”

“But this turnout was shocking in a good way. We are a small community but we are strong and stand together.” The event raised \$5,000.

Fifteen years ago, Hettiarachchi was part of a fundraiser at Saint Andrew’s Episcopal Church after Sri Lanka was hit by a tsunami. Caldera says this is the first time the group has responded to terrorism.

“I didn’t know this Islamic State existed in Sri Lanka and I don’t think Sri Lankans living there were aware of it,” says Caldera, information technology practice director at UW-Madison’s School of Engineering. “Our country has had peace for 10 years. It just wasn’t something that we ever even anticipated would happen.”

The Sri Lanka government responded to the bombings by banning both burkas and Sunday Mass. Caldera says the country is trying to maintain safety and its main source of revenue, tourism.

“This has decimated that sense of safety so much so that we are going to Colombo tomorrow and my mother has told us not to come,” he says.

But Caldera is undeterred. He and his wife plan to deliver another gift to the people of Sri Lanka, created that night.

On the far wall of the dining hall hangs a large card that reads, “Madison [Heart] Sri Lanka” for anyone to sign. Peace, love and cross symbols are scattered on the card, along with blessings written in Sinhala, the Indo-Aryan language, and English greetings like “Our hearts are with you.”

“We have people in our community who are Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu and Muslim, but here in Madison, we’re all Sri Lankans,” says Atapattu. “It’s wonderful that we don’t have those differences here and it’s special to know that the people in Sri Lanka will get to hear our prayers to them from here too.”

Estimated number of civilians killed by 26-year civil war: **100,000**

People killed by 2004 tsunami: **31,000**

Sarvodaya USA: **Based in Madison since 1988, it works to foster non-violence, service and cooperation.**

Inspiration for Sarvodaya: **John Ruskin and Mohandas Gandhi**

Dessert Atapattu made for the fundraiser: **Traditional golden butter cake**

SNAPSHOT

RELATED

•

JUDITH DAVIDOFF

A cool ride

Why haul beer on foot to that tailgate when you can pack it into a custom-made “Kooler Kart” and enjoy the ride? That was the thought bubble of engineer Adam Jablonski.

OCT 18, 2018

•

VICTORIA DAVIS

Winter birds

Bitter cold, six inches of snow and 10 mph winds — for the Wisconsin Hoofers, it’s the perfect time to go snowkiting on Lake Mendota

FEB 28, 2019

•

CHRIS LOTTEN

Opening night

Madison’s new concert venue, The Sylvee, is finally open. Aaron Conklin wanders the crowd to see what the fuss is all about.

OCT 4, 2018

COMMENTS

Type subject