

The good 'Dracula'

From talking students out of jumping into lakes to giving money to families for last rites, volunteer Ram Sundher lives to lend a helping hand

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At a social function in Bangalore a few years ago, Ram Sundher sat two chairs away from a man whose face he found vaguely familiar. Sundher just realised why, but the man — a successful businessman, who was there to give a speech — didn't betray any signs of recognition. Until he referred to Sundher as "my guru" and credited him for saving his life. The businessman wasn't just talking metaphorically. The 57-year-old had actually stopped the once-young man from taking his own life.

In the 1980s, Ulsoor Lake was Bangalore's suicide venue of choice when it came to students. Dejected after scoring abysmally in the Secondary School Leaving Certificate and Pre-University College exam results, many would drown to death in Bangalore's biggest lake. Sundher, a marketing engineer for Associated

Electronic & Electric Industries Bangalore Pvt Limited, used to frequent the area to visit an old friend. Keen to help, in 1985, Sundher decided to patrol the lake a day prior to the day of the results' announcement. He talked many a person, including that businessman, out of ending his or her life over mark sheets. That five-year patrol saved many more lives and set Sundher onto a lifetime mission of helping people and saving lives.

"I was a social child and loved being around people and talking to them," Sundher recalls the reason why he felt the pull towards volunteering.

Sundher always felt at ease amidst the chaos and blood of the casualty ward, and even earned himself the nickname Dracula



LESSONS OF LIFE Sundher (extreme right) also trains other volunteers

to Kolar with their dead son's body.

Sundher went on to complete his Masters in Human Behaviour and Counselling to deal with tragedies and people better. His volunteering zeal has taken him to the hazardous hot spots in the country — Orissa floods and the earthquake in Bhuj, for example — and he is especially sent to areas where his multilingual skills come in handy while coordinating with local NGOs.

Soon, Sundher — who is up for an Apeejay India Volunteer Award — began helping out other NGOs. He helped set up a scheme for volunteers and groomed young boys and girls and even enlisted the help of the old and retired as part of the golden handshake program.

In '99, he was asked by the Rotary Club, Bangalore to compile a directory of voluntary organisations in Karnataka. His findings: Out of 713 voluntary organisations, only 400 were "working." He was part of the core group that set Ability in Disability in 2000, an initiative that helps train the differently abled to assemble electric items and is also a member of the Task Force for Secularism at YMCA.

Helping others at the cost of ignoring his own family isn't an easy jibe to live down, but in Suryaprabha, Sundher found an understanding wife, who brought up their daughter Vasudha almost single-handedly. Today his volunteering efforts are restricted and he's devoting his time to his wife instead, who runs the house on the Rs 15,000 pension he receives from Bangalore Care, an NGO that has Sundher on their rolls as a coordinator. "Sari dariya ke log paise ke peeche daultein hain, aise bhi log hain jiske peeche paise daudta hai aur woh hum hain," he delivers the lines in his inimitable South Indian accent. ■

"If left to me, I would've become a volunteer earlier but I was forced to study electrical engineering. I didn't want to hold a job, but had to, and opted for marketing since it allowed me to travel and meet people," he adds.

And the students who he couldn't reach in time, he helped the police in recovering the bodies with the help of local fishermen. He would even help families when it came to claiming dead bodies of their loved ones. "To claim a dead body isn't simple," the very affable Sundher says. "Especially if it's an unnatural death like drowning. The entire process of getting an FIR filed and dealing with the police, who would sometimes try and extract money from the family, can be quite torturous."

But Sundher didn't find the sight of bodies repulsive. He in fact revealed in the support that he offered complete strangers.

In 1994, Sundher began volunteering at hospital, with the help of a voluntary organisation called Helping Hands. When asked how he wanted to help, he only had one question. "Which hospital gets the most and worst accident cases?"

The casualty ward at NIMHANS, Bangalore was where he chose to work. Strangely, Sundher felt at ease amidst the chaos and blood of the casualty ward, and even earned himself the nickname Dracula. "I was never afraid of blood whereas people used to faint," the Phantom comics fan jokes.

Sundher's job was to console the family and friends of the accident victim, but his help was met with resistance earlier. "No one just goes to hospitals and people would often keep me at an arm's length," he remarks but his humour and gentle words soon won everyone over. He once even gave a Muslim family money to travel back