

Stories that touched you

By KUMUDINI HETTIARACHCHI

The Sunday Times, throughout its 25 years of publication, has been many things to many people. A paper with “something” to hold and keep riveted each and every member of the family, the Sunday Times has moulded opinion, guided policy-makers, highlighted not only the negatives but also the positives, provided information and been a “lifeline” to numerous voiceless men, women and children who had no one to turn to.

Among many whose plight the Sunday Times brought to the attention of its wide readership, both in Sri Lanka and abroad, and helped to climb out of an abyss of despair and hopelessness, two have stood out as major “campaigns” carried out with the overwhelming support of our readers.

Here are the stories of Asitha Fernando, whose face depicted the tragedy of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, and the ‘Bubble Baby’ whom Sri Lankans, here and scattered across the globe adopted as their own to save from death.

Asitha Fernando

The boy is now a man. Asitha Rukshan Fernando who turns 17 on October 2, this year, has done his Ordinary Level examination, held a small job not so long ago, quit it after being ill with chicken pox and is now on the look-out for a new job to help his eldest sister, Ashani and her family, “with the bills”.

It was Asitha’s anguished and tear-streaked face at his mother’s funeral



Asitha in 2004: The picture of tsunami grief that went around the world

that gripped the world and became the “face” of the collective tragedy of the tsunami which hit Sri Lanka on

December 26, 2004. An international wire service had captured his face at his mother’s

funeral and sent it across the world to be splashed by newspapers in more than 100 countries.

However, it is the Sunday Times which combed the congested alleys of Koralawella, Moratuwa, traced little Asitha to a tiny plank shack in the slums there and made his plight public on February 13, 2005, in ‘Face that launched a sea of sympathy’, after the media hype had ended and moved on to other stories.

His mother, Ranjini, was dead having been engulfed by the tsunami waves at Egoda Uyana, where she and Asitha had hurried to ensure that

some relatives were safe.

In that interview soon after his mother’s death, Asitha described the event that would change his life forever: How the waves drew back first and the tsunami struck without warning. He and the other people ran to the new road. What he didn’t know amidst the confusion and the screams of terror was that his beloved mother had been dragged by the ferocious waves, tossed around violently and then been wedged under a heavy cabinet.

When the Sunday Times published his story, our offices were inundated by phone calls with offers of help. Some, armed with the newspaper, had gone to Asitha’s home bearing gifts of food, clothing and money.

Asitha’s father, Ivan, had been provided with the tools of his trade – a bicycle, the box, the scales, the manna-knife of the fisherman – for they too had been washed away by the tsunami.

Two benefactors, who swore the Sunday Times to secrecy and asked that their names should not be published, were not satisfied with temporary help. They were in it for the long haul.



Asitha in 2012: A brave face but he carries the scars

While they were helping the family, which included Ashani who is married but also struggling to survive and middle sister Ruwangika called Bunty

who is mentally-disabled, the family reeled under a second blow.

Soon after they lit a few candles at their mother’s grave on her first death anniversary, their father fell off the train, on his way home after selling fish in Colombo, with Asitha’s booklist for Grade 6 still in his pocket. Rushed first to Lunawa Hospital and then to the Accident Service in Colombo, it was an unconscious Ivan on machines in the Intensive Care Unit that the distraught family saw before he died.

Though orphaned, with only impoverished relatives and a Catholic

