

An Interview with:

**Mr. Vidyakar
Founder
Udavum Karangal**

***Vidyakar** is a unique person who has demonstrated the power of the individual initiative. He founded Udavum Karangal (<http://www.udavumkarangal.org>) which means "Helping Hands" in 1983. Today the organization provides shelter and succor to 1,800 newborns, abandoned children, ill and destitute persons, with the aim of rehabilitation. It is funded entirely by voluntary donations and helping hands: no government help is sought.*

Vidyakar began his career as a Social Worker in a slum in Chennai. Udavum Karangal traces its roots to the day a rickshaw puller brought in a baby boy who had been abandoned in a cinema hall. Vidyakar felt impelled to take care of the baby. From such a humble beginning, the organization today has five centers and fifty dedicated volunteers giving succor to those most in need: the abandoned, the dying, the disabled, the HIV+, and the mentally ill. There is a home for the dying, a children's village, a home for women in distress, a love basket for abandoned infants, and more.



Udavum Karangal has many projects lined up awaiting financial assistance, including housing and a classroom for children, a computer, sports and music equipment, and an ambulance.

What inspired you to start Udavum Karangal (Helping Hands)?

My background is very similar to the children Udavum Karangal (*Helping Hands*) supports. I have no parents and was quite alone, with no one to take care of me. At the age of thirteen I was just another child on the streets when one day I saw a car accident. I helped the man in the car who was hurt, and visited him in the hospital for a couple of days. This happened in Mysore (in the state of Karnataka in India) so the man was alone too. He was struck by the care I showed him, and decided to take me in. Although he had a family of his own, who did not really want me since I was an unrelated third person and outsider, he adopted me.

Was he a social worker?

No, he was an ordinary man with an automobile business. He saw the evidence of my caring nature when I visited him in hospital, and wanted to nurture it in order that I may help others in future. He wanted me to be a social worker. When he passed away, I followed his wish, which was my wish too. I did Masters in Sociology and Psychology from India and became a social worker.

How did your friends and acquaintances react to your decision to found Udavum Karangal?

Although I did not face any concrete opposition to my decision, neither did I get any support for it. My friends and teachers thought it was not a good decision because they believed one needs lot of money and lots of people to start an organization. They thought I would not succeed, but I was determined to go ahead.

Why do you not take government funds?

If one takes government funds, one has to go along with what they say. I think that you have to give bribes in order to extract government money, something that I am not prepared to do. The government knows about my work, in fact they refer people to my work, but I am not very cooperative with them, and neither do they proactively step forward to give me any support. Besides, I feel that it is society that is responsible for the abandoned and the destitute, and it is community support that must take care of them.

Is there any one unique experience in your life as a social worker that stands out in your memory?

There are hundreds of such experiences! But I will share one of them with you. A few years ago I received a call, saying that there was an abandoned baby in a dustbin. I hurried to rescue it, but by the time I got there, a dog had got hold of it and dragged it into a filthy water pipe. With great difficulty we managed to rescue the baby, whose leg had been injured by the dog. It was a newborn premature baby. I took it home and cleaned it up and administered first aid, because no hospital would have taken it in otherwise. I admitted the baby in a private hospital where the doctors managed to save it after a lot of care. Today the baby is an eight-year old school-going girl called Savitri.

Do you have any message or advice for young people?

I would like to say that social work is not for everyone. Charity begins at home, though it does not have to end there. If everyone took care of their kith and kin, then we would not have the problem of abandoned and destitute people. The biggest problem in the world is rejection, the abandoning of the old and the sick, the unwanted newborns. We live in a pathological society. People are driven out of their homes and have nowhere to go. So young people should take care of their families.

Are you single or married?

I am not married, but I have a huge family of 1,800 people. To a sick old woman, I am her son. To an abandoned baby, I am mother and father. I also have many brothers and sisters!

How many volunteers and assistants do you have?

I have 52 volunteers, and there are also some people who are paid for their services, such as doctors and special educators.

What are your future plans?

To continue what I am doing now, and to make *Udavum Karangal* well organized. I plan to start a hospital because medical services for 1,800 people are needed, and not many doctors are interested in providing this. I also think of starting a training course for social workers.

If you are reading this interview and are motivated by the work of Udavum Karangal, then you can consider making a small donation to Udavum Karangal to support the work it is doing.

You can do so by making an online credit-card donation at <http://www.udavumkarangal.org/login.asp>

Or you can draw a check or draft in the name of Udavum Karangal (payable at Chennai) and posting it in India to:

Udavum Karangal,
#460, N.S.K. Nagar,
Chennai - 600 106, India
Email: udavum@vsnl.com

Or, if you are in North America, to:

Udavum Karangal of USA,
C/O, Vedas
23, Crosby Drive
Bedford, MA-01730, USA
Email: sundar@vedas.com

Say Hello to Life

Hello Life (www.hellolife.org) is a voluntary effort dedicated to improving the lives of people worldwide. The aim is to embrace life: and to help those less fortunate to embrace it as well. Hello Life periodically features an extraordinary individual initiative or South-based organization that has made the difference where it counts: at the grassroots.

One of the core aims of Hello Life is to link up and share information on South-based initiatives that so far have an inadequate web presence. Hello Life volunteers will aid such organizations to develop a web presence of their own. It is hoped that this will catalyze their work and further the overall mission of improving the lives of people worldwide.

Do you know of a unique individual initiative or small South-based organization that has made a difference to people's lives? Would it benefit from the publicity of being featured as the "Helping Hand of the month" on HelloLife.org? Then share it with us at helpinghands@hellolife.org.

Join Hello Life and become part of our network:

Send a blank email to hellolife-subscribe@yahoogroups.com and receive updates on network activities, featured stories and the latest "Helping Hand of the month".