Ramya

Ramya Sundararajan is someone who turned around her entire career to be of service to society. An idealistic teacher with clear perspectives on social structures, Ramya is a pleasure to talk with. Read on to sneak a peek into her early life, work, and vision.

- Profile

Profile

Spring of 2003. A smart new officer joined Citibank after graduating in commerce and doing post-graduation in business administration. Well-qualified, meticulous, and motivated. There was no doubt that a glittering career in banking lay ahead of her. However, there was a void in her eight-hour-long desk job that persisted despite the prospect of a rewarding future. Two-and-a-half years later, the young professional took a plunge that many shy away from. Her decision to conclude her Citibank chronicles set in motion a string of events that would later decide her career, vision, and perspectives. Chatting with Ramya, what strikes one the most is her clarity of thought and command over language. Childhood summers in Chennai packed with PG Wodehouse's books that she inherited from her brother and an upbringing in an equitable family form the crux of her worldview. Ramya's social commitment drove her to work in water conservation and waste management projects.

The new chapter in Ramya's life saw her wielding a chalk before a bunch of students; she joined as an English tutor at an entrance preparation institute. It is here that her teaching skills earned appreciation, introducing her to a career choice that had never before occurred to her.

Ramya prefers to give credit to the circumstances that allowed her the opportunity to explore rather than to her courage to pick unconventional trails. "I am cognizant of my good fortune, and I seek to utilise it to engage in what I love," she says. "I am also very particular about the work I do, and I work only in spaces where I can thrive. I have had to step away from certain paths, and I can now say with conviction that quitting has been my best decision." She completed a certificate course in English language teaching from Cambridge University and arrived at the threshold of Azim Premji University.

The seeker in Ramya is rivalled in zeal only by the teacher in her. "Students learn not because of the teacher's capacity to teach, but because of the students' capacity to learn. A classroom with 40 students–that is, 40 unique minds–cannot be dominated by the single mind of the teacher," explains Ramya. As she talks about teaching, it becomes clear why she walked out of a potentially bright banking career. "I find it unsettling that many teachers refer to their students as 'children' when the students' ages have nothing to do with their role in the classroom. Teachers must sculpt methods according to their students' needs and carve a space of dignity and respect. A teacher is

ultimately a facilitator," she says. Listening to her, one is left to marvel at the difference such teachers can make in the lives of students.

Fast-forward to the winter of 2019. This was when the idea of WeLive Foundation took life. The story of WeLive began when a caregiver at a childcare institution witnessed first-hand the despair experienced by 18-year-olds when they leave their institutions. He recognised the need to assist such youngsters for a couple of years while they transition to independent living. Consequently, WeLive was conceived as a bridge between care institutions and the outside world. The NGO offers residential and non-residential support to young care-leavers, focusing on well-being and work readiness.

Ramya has been with WeLive right from its beginning, and warmly cherishes the growth of the organisation. "WeLive started off as an idea, a hope to assist care-leavers effectively, and today, it has grown into four centres in Bengaluru and Chennai. Built on compassion and social impact, our organisation does not require its team to have specific educational qualifications. At WeLive, empathy is the highest qualification," she says. Ramya is unwilling to bow down not only to conventional career expectations but also to traditional trains of thought. Speaking of the increasing number of children in care institutions, Ramya opines, "Parenthood is perhaps the most important job in the world. Rather ironically, it is the only job that requires no qualification or experience. Our society perceives marriage and procreation as mandatory checkboxes to strike off. In this scenario, couples delve into parenthood without ensuring they are ready to handle the humongous responsibility. And very often, their babies end up at the doorsteps of care institutions."

WeLive met aikyam fellows through Shemeer, who has been a well-wisher and mentor of WeLive since its inception. Ramya acknowledges aikyam's importance to WeLive, "aikyam space has assisted us during our meetings with childcare institutions. We have conducted training programs and workshops for care-leavers at aikyam space, and aikyam fellows handle our design and tech divisions. I look forward to forging partnerships on different fronts with the amazing team at aikyam."

The precision in Ramya's plans gleams as she synopsises her goals for WeLive. She details, "We envision another six centres, a whole array of programs for care-leavers, and the capacity to assist at least 3,000 care-leavers in a year, in the next 10 years." When asked about more personal goals, she laughed, "I don't even want to have property in my name. No matter what I own, at the

end of it all, I am not going to take anything with me!”

Ramya is an English language teacher and an integral part of WeLive Foundation. At the NGO, she assists 18-year-olds leaving childcare institutions who are forced to navigate the world on their own. WeLive and aikyam often enter into partnerships, helping each other make the world a slightly better place. Check out WeLive's activities here.