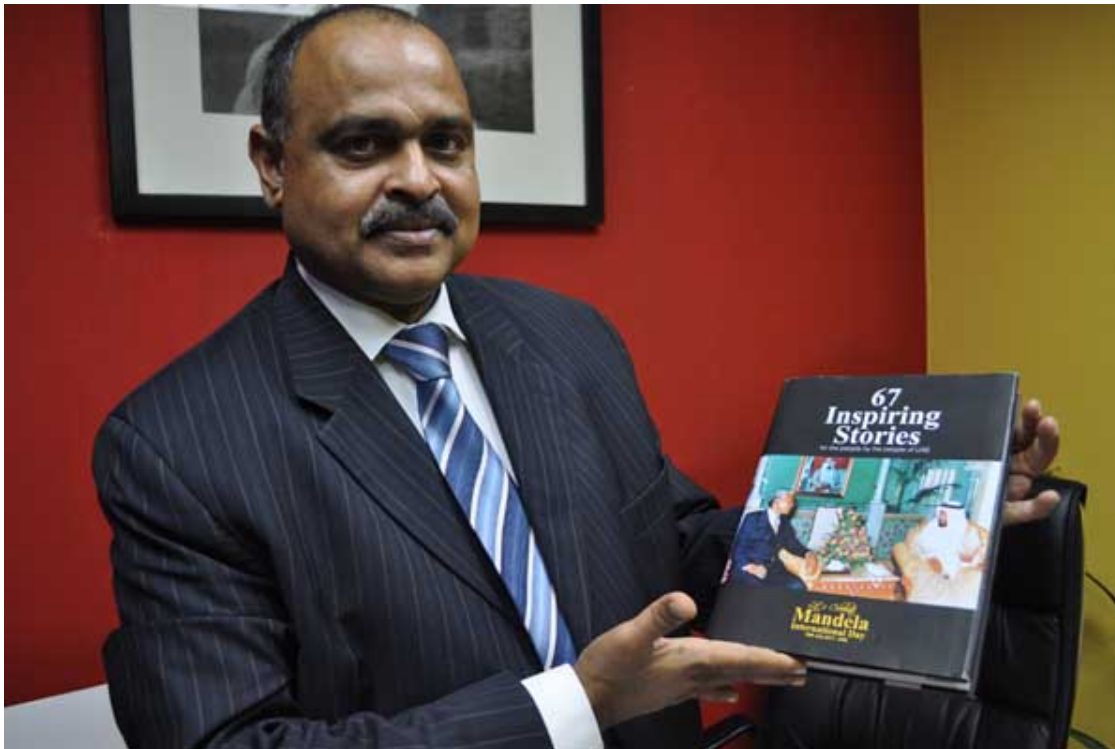


Want to see your stories of community service included in the beautiful hardback edition Nahtam Social Responsibility will publish later this year? There's still time to submit, says CEO George Itty



How did Nahtam Social Responsibility begin?

I met Isabelle Le Bon-Poonoosamy five years ago when I was working in advertising. For years, I used my specialization in advertising for commercial purposes, but in my extra free time I would help with community activities. One of the most high profile campaigns I helped create was the Donate A Brick programme to raise money for the Special Care Centre – the idea was that people could pay AED 5 to get a brick which would be used for building the school. We have had a lot of support. HH Sheikh Muhammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, agreed to support the Donate a Brick campaign and we are profoundly grateful.

Why was this project to important to you?

Most of the private schools in the UAE are commercial ventures, so it's not cost effective for them to accommodate students with special needs. It costs a minimum of AED 28000 to provide a reasonably good education for a child with special needs, but many of those families just can't afford it.

So, in a way, the Special Care Centre was Nahtam's first serious project?

Yes. Three years ago, I had been working for a commercial company as a creative director for 17 years. Isabelle and I started talking about how we could go about providing the support the kids needed, but we had limited time. We realised that what we really needed was some creative minds to build some infrastructure and get some marketing going. This was when we thought of Nahtam. The same day we met Ebrahim Al Haddar, a highly educated, good-hearted Emirati keen to make a difference. He joined us and became the chairman of Nahtam.

How big is your staff here at Nahtam?

Isabelle is the vice president and I am the CEO. We have 12 full time staff members including myself and Ms Le Bon and none of us earns a salary. We have a lot of volunteers with different capabilities which we are channelling for the community work.

Have you been able to contribute to other schools for kids with special needs?

Yes – we're now working with the Al Noor Centre which caters to 97 children. We took on that school last year, starting with small things. When we first visited them, we learned that they had nothing, not even a computer. Now all the classrooms have a computer. We helped with cleaning the school and putting some paint on the walls, and we are also giving training for teachers – we have at least three or four workshops every year for the teachers. We've also organised coffee mornings with the children. Every other month, we invite 15 or 20 people from different organisations to the school to meet the children. We don't have to talk because once people see the school and the kids, they understand what needs to be done.

You don't ask for donations – how can people in the community help Nahtam?

Nahtam as an organization doesn't want to get involved with money. This is our policy. When we say we are volunteers, we mean that we are doing community work. What we'd rather do is tell people, 'This school needs X, Y and Z.' If people want to help, they can either buy the items and give them directly to the school, or give money directly to them. If you give the money to us, how will you know that your donation has gone where you wanted it to go? We would rather simply make the community aware of the needs. How are we sustainable? There is a commercial side to the business, Nahtam Advertising, generating income from advertising, design and printing and corporate gifts. Any profits made from that side of the business goes into Nahtam Social Responsibility.

What other projects are you working on at the moment?

Currently, we are looking for partners to sponsor educational computer games targeting three to seven year olds. The games cover really important issues such as road safety, the environment, good health, good habits and UAE marine life in a fun way for children to understand and enjoy.

You've been collecting stories about community service for several weeks – is there still time to submit stories for the book Nahtam is going to publish?

Yes, we've extended the deadline to 24th November. In celebration of Nelson Mandela's 67 years of community service, we're asking everyone – schools, colleges, individuals and universities – to submit a few details and photos about the community works they have undertaken in 2010 or 2011, whether in the UAE or overseas. The entries will go into a selection process with the best being featured in an inspiring hardback book entitled 67 Inspiring Stories due for publication at the end of the year. All good works in the community will be considered from walking a neighbour's dog while they were sick to fundraising for an orphanage in Cambodia.

Laura Fulton

Socially responsible

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To find out more about how you can help Nahtam or to request an entry form, email Althea at nahtam@nahtam.com or visit their website www.nahtam.com