

A LYRICAL LAWYER

There's a hook in the office of Maithri Panagoda. It's where he hangs his suit coat – and his work problems – at the end of each day as a personal injury lawyer and partner at Carroll & O'Dea. **JANE SOUTHWARD** reports.

I tell young lawyers and anyone who comes here for work experience that you need to leave your problems at the office. That's where they belong," says Maithri Panagoda from his office overlooking Sydney's Hyde Park. "Law is a tough business, but people can get addicted to alcohol or cigarettes or even the work as a way of dealing with it. I know leaving my coat here is a symbol, but it means something. To have work life balance you need something else in your life. For me, it is music and songs."

For Panagoda, 64, writing lyrics and contributing to the Sri Lankan community are his outlets. He started writing short stories and then songs when he was in his teens. In the 1970s, he had many songs recorded and broadcast. However, when he left Sri Lanka in 1975 for London to pursue post-graduate studies, he says he lost his energy for the creative arts.

Now with his three adult children and two grandchildren to inspire him, he has started writing again. He has released a CD with 19 Sinhalese songs he has penned, 10 which were released in the 1970s and nine that he has created in the past two years. "For 30 years I didn't do anything with music," he says. "But about two years ago the urge to write came back to me. My children are happy and independent, so I guess I felt a bit free to start writing again."

"My songs are love songs or patriotic songs. Recently, a friend asked me to write a song for his father who has Alzheimer's and doesn't recognise him. He wanted the song as a way of reaching him. When I am writing I have a melody in my head, but I am not a singer. For me it's about the words."

Another key project is the recording of a CD with children from Sri Lankan families in Sydney who are learning Sinhalese. The idea is to teach them Sinhalese and encourage them to sing. The CD will be released at the end of 2014.

Panagoda's move to Australia came after a chance meeting at the Australian High Commission in London. He and his wife, Ramya, were walking past the commission and stumbled upon an open day. "We met a staffer and asked him to tell us about Australia," Panagoda recalls. "He did such a good job that within weeks we were applying to move."

However, once in Sydney with a young baby, he applied for 42 jobs and kept getting knocked back because he had no NSW experience. After many months, he donned a three-piece suit and tie and took a train to Dubbo for an interview at the Western Aboriginal Legal Service.

"I didn't know where Dubbo was or anything much about Aboriginal people," he says. "I met 12 people who were on the board of directors of the service. Many were wearing t-shirts and thongs. Can you imagine what they thought of me? I felt so out of place."

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MAITHRI PANAGODA

"Still, I got the job and my wife and I decided to give it a go for six months because there was no other work and we had a young baby to feed. We ended up staying 10 years and loved it. The work was heart-breaking at times and I travelled to Broken Hill, Cobar, Bourke and other outback areas. I did deaths in custody cases and some Stolen Generation cases."

"When we moved back to Sydney in 1991 I kept my contacts. I am now pursuing a claim for damages on behalf of about 170 members of the Stolen Generation. It's a tragic case. Many are in their 60s and 70s now. For a lot of them it isn't about the money. What they really want is someone to look at them and say they are sorry."

Another community project he has been involved in was a fundraising effort for Sri Lankan children orphaned after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The disaster touched him personally as his wife, her sisters and two teenage children were on a beach near Trincomalee when the tsunami hit. He couldn't contact her for almost a day and Ramya spent years recovering from the trauma.

Together with some Australian and Sri Lankan friends they set up the AustraLanka Helpline and have supported 260 children orphaned as a result of the tsunami. The couple also supports 130 children orphaned by the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka.

The couple's children are making their parents proud. Gajanath is a paediatrician in Brisbane, Ruvani is principal legal officer at the Attorney-General's Department in Canberra, and Mathisha, who was nominated as Young Australian of the Year this year, is a cellist at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and a lawyer at Carroll & O'Dea. **LSJ**