

# From public relations to Indian education

Former PR professional Sylvia Holder expected a leisurely retirement. Instead, she's running an education charity in a poor Indian village after a chance encounter almost 30 years ago

## Tell us about your early life

I was born in Lancashire but my parents were southerners and we returned to London just before the end of the Second World War when I was about five. From the age of nine I went to boarding school. I didn't mind it but it was dreadful – so Dickensian – but somehow it did me quite a lot of good. I refused to be poured into the mould they wanted for me and it gave me very good independence for my future life. I left at 17. What I wanted to do was journalism but everyone said, "You'll make a good secretary, dear" – so I did the obligatory secretarial course and landed my first job as the editor's secretary at what was then the *Bristol Evening World* newspaper. It was a fabulous first job to get and I was also allowed to do a bit of writing.

## Where did you go from there?

I stayed for about two years before moving to be a secretary in a PR office in London. Straight away I knew that PR was for me and began the process of becoming a



Sylvia Holder with some of the children in the village

fully-fledged PR person. I was also a keen traveller and went to the States when I was 21, living in places like Chicago and San Francisco. I returned to London in 1963 and secured a PR job with Bowater Scott who made disposable paper products. In 1968 I got itchy feet again and went to Canada. I didn't really enjoy it but I was basically working my way around the world.

## What happened next?

I was offered the opportunity to take over a PR job in Hong Kong from the person who used to be my boss at Bowater Scott. The company had some great accounts, so I said yes, took a liner and when I arrived was asked to sign a five-year contract. I had no intention of staying for

five years, as I wanted to work my way round the world, so I had to refuse and was consequently left jobless and totally penniless during what was a difficult time in Hong Kong when there were riots. Eventually I got a job at the Peninsula Hotel, one of the world's top five hotels, as a secretary and later became banqueting manager. In 1972 I returned to London, as PR manager at the Carlton Tower Hotel in Knightsbridge, before moving abroad again, this time as a PR for Southern Sun Hotels in South Africa. From there I joined a PR company in South Africa. One of the highlights was being involved in the organisation of a celebrity tennis match attended by Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, who were between weddings at the time.



We took them on tour and they decided to re-marry, so in a way I can lay claim to having a hand in them getting married in Botswana in 1975.

## What direction did your career take you in then?

I started freelancing as a PR professional in South Africa but couldn't stand the apartheid so I returned home and set up Holder Swan Public Relations with Lindsay Swan, who I'd met in South Africa. We concentrated on PR for hotels and travel and we'd take groups of journalists to places like Africa and India. During one visit in the late Eighties I was walking along a beach near Kovalam in the south-east Indian state of Tamil Nadu, around 40km south of Chennai. I met a little boy called Venkat. He was 12 years old, as poor as a church mouse, as thin as a rake and absolutely endearing. I'd just come from the posh manicured beach of the Taj Hotel and he showed me round his poverty-stricken village, and then we went to a local café and I bought him food. He was delightful. He asked me for £10 for his school fees because his father couldn't afford them and I happily gave

him £10 and told him I'd support him through his education if he could get to university. I never expected to hear from him again. However, Venkat proved to be a hard-working student, and he went on to graduate from Madras University. I went back to visit a couple of times during that time.

## How did your life change next?

In 2000 I retired and moved to Hove – thinking I was going to have long leisurely lunches, spend time reading and doing collages and other things I like doing. Then one morning I had a phone call in the early hours to say that Venkat, who was then 27, had been killed in a road accident. It was heart-breaking news. I decided to go back to Kovalam to see what I could do in his memory. At first I thought about something like a television set for the village square but my mind changed when Venkat's brother, JR, took me to see the local primary school. It was shocking. It was falling down. There were not enough teachers and those who were there weren't qualified. Morale was low and the kids looked bedraggled and unhappy. Kovalam is a desperately poor fishing village. I returned home and set up the Venkatraman Memorial Trust.

## How did you go about launching a charity?

Initially I sent letters to everyone I knew. Everyone responded. In December 2004 there was a double-page feature in a national magazine about the charity and the story behind it. A few days later the

Indian Ocean tsunami hit on Boxing Day. We thought everyone would be, quite rightly, supporting charity appeals following the tsunami, but when I went to collect the post from the sorting office we had more than 200 letters with pledges of over £15,000. There were also offers of support from people who still support us today. Since then we've raised £830,000, which has helped the village in so many ways, but always through supporting education.

## What has the Venkatraman Memorial Trust achieved?

The primary school has been transformed from its bottom-of-the-pile status to a prize-winning school. The literacy rate has gone up from 60 to 95 per cent. It has new classroom buildings, dining hall, tuition centre, sports ground, qualified teachers, books and computers. We provide 850 sets of uniforms twice a year. We've built a high school for 1000 pupils with a state-of-the-art library and science lab. Some 250 of the village's most needy children are sponsored by individuals in the UK, with life-changing results. They write regularly to their sponsors and are always delighted to hear from them. No sponsored child is denied the opportunity to progress to further education and many are now at university or have graduated. Our aim is to enable every young person in the village, sponsored or otherwise, to realise their potential and thus enjoy a fulfilling career and happy future. Education is the only way to escape the poverty trap this village has endured for generations. Every penny donated goes to the work in Kovalam, with the UK costs being paid by the trustees.

## What's life like for you?

It's very busy but hugely rewarding in lots of ways. I just can't imagine any other life. I'm 77, working full-time and visiting Kovalam twice a year. Retirement? What's that?

Interview by Louise Duffield

## Find out more

For details about the Venkatraman Memorial Trust and ways of sponsoring a child, backing its university fund or supporting the charity, tel: 01273 719363, e-mail: (info@venkatrust.org.uk), website: (www.venkatrust.org.uk).