If you graduated from the Nanyang Business School’s Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme in July 2018, you would have had Mr Pravin Raj as your fellow coursemate. Cutting a confident and convincing figure during presentations, the 34-year-old Strategic Planning Manager (Asia Pacific) at automation solutions provider Emerson emcees events, delivers public speaking training on a part-time basis and was President of the NBS MBA Student Executive Council from 2017-2018.

But beneath Mr Raj’s polished demeanour is a humble individual that gives back to society in more ways than one. In his free time, he volunteers with local charities and non-profit organisations and actively participates in panel discussions on current social issues. To top it off, he is also the sponsor of the Sellappah Scholarship, which aims to provide financial aid to students from Southeast Asia (excluding Singapore), Africa and South America who are committed to making a positive contribution towards the development of their respective home countries and communities.

“It has always been a dream of mine to help underprivileged and deserving students achieve their academic aspirations,” said Mr Raj. “I believe everyone deserves the opportunity to obtain a quality education, to give them the stepping stone they need.”

A history of giving

The Sellappah Scholarship is named after Mr Raj’s late grandfather, Mr K.N. Sellappah, who was a mentor to Mr Raj and a staunch advocate for education. Born in 1913 in Sri Lanka to a poor family, Mr Sellappah became a school teacher before selling what he could to journey to Malaya in search of a better life.

During the second World War, he was kidnapped and forced to work on the construction of the infamous Thai-Burma Death Railway. Fortunately, Mr Sellappah survived that ordeal to live a long and fulfilling life. He passed away in 2006 at 92 years of age but left behind valuable lessons on the importance of discipline, education, perseverance and community service to his grandson.

“He played a big role in my life. I always looked up to him,” said Mr Raj, describing his late grandfather as a “calm and composed” person whom his family could always turn to for advice. “He was not a strict disciplinarian, but did things with a lot of love, and inspired you to do better.”

One such scenario etched into Mr Raj’s memory is the day he showed a perfect test score to his grandfather. “He looked at it and said, ‘You can improve on the handwriting’. I smile when I think about it today. That was something he instilled in me: it is good to pat yourself on the back when you have done well, but also constantly strive to be better, not just for yourself, but for other people. Always think about how you can do more.’

Many drops make a shower

Mr Sellappah’s words continue to inspire Mr Raj, spurring him on to pay it forward whenever he can. In fact, the Sellappah Scholarship at NBS is the second one he has established in his grandfather’s name; the first is at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom, where Mr Raj completed his undergraduate studies and received his bachelor’s degree.

“The NBS team was very helpful and fantastic from start to finish when I told them I wanted to set up the scholarship. They made it happen quickly and always kept me in the loop, so I was always aware of the progress. The important thing was having the right people with a similar mindset and desire to get things done.” Mr Raj said.

To encourage others who may be keen to contribute to society in their own small ways, Mr Raj had this to say: “Every little bit helps. I would encourage others to identify causes that they are passionate about and think about what they can do to make a difference in some way. Once they have that figured out, the rest of the pieces will fall in place automatically. The positive impact you can create in the lives of others cannot be underestimated.”

A GRANDFATHER’S LOVE SPARKS CHARITY

Mr Pravin Raj (NBS/2018) shares how his grandfather inspired him to establish the Sellappah Scholarship at the Nanyang Business School.