



KESHINI SENEVIRATNE SURaweera FROM PERSONAL RESILIENCE TO GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Keshini on Entrepreneurship, Creativity, Faith, Resilience and Taking Sri Lankan Artisans to the World.

Entrepreneur. Chartered Global Management Accountant. Corporate leader. Retailer. Creative. Mother. Community builder.

For Keshini, the different strands of her life — business, creativity, leadership, motherhood and faith — have never existed entirely separately. Over time, they have converged to shape an entrepreneurial journey built as much on resilience, decision-making and problem-solving as on commercial ambition.

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CAN Market was a COVID-birthing community initiative.

When the world was being told what could not be done, we dared to say, “**We CAN!**”

And together, we persevered.

CAN — Creative Artisans Network



KESHINI SENEVIRATNE SURaweera

Founder, The Creative Isle CAN Market Initiative
Director, Kadapatha Clothing



Keshini and former Mayor of Colombo, Madam Rosy at the CAN launch of CAN Market at Shangri-La One Galle Face Mall

Her story begins with two formative influences: an entrepreneurial foundation from her father and a creative streak inherited from her mother.

Her alma mater, St. Bridget's Convent, Colombo, played a formative role in nurturing her leadership skills. She went on to serve as Head Prefect, an early experience that shaped her confidence, sense of responsibility and willingness to take initiative.

At the same time, she was deeply creative. She studied art until she was almost twenty and, at one stage, imagined a future in the creative world.

But she also came from an entrepreneurial family. From the age of nineteen, Keshini worked alongside her father, learning the ropes of business firsthand while pursuing her professional studies in accountancy.

At that young crossroads, she chose what seemed to be the safer path — a professional qualification rather than an uncertain creative career. She went on to become a Chartered Global Management Accountant and an Associate Member of CIMA (ACMA, CGMA), and later completed an MBA from the University of Wales.

Learning Business Under Pressure

Keshini's first significant entrepreneurial chapter began as a director of the family business, Nilano Garments, situated in the Ratmalana Industrial

Estate. For nearly a decade, she helped manage a labor-intensive garment manufacturing operation employing over 200 workers, exporting to reputed brands in Europe and the USA. This exposed her early to high-pressure commercial environments demanding constant decision-making, problem-solving and adaptability.

She gained international exposure through overseas trade fairs facilitated by the Export Development Board. Nilano Garments was also selected as a model factory for training programs conducted by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in collaboration with the Export Development Board. Her entrepreneurial achievements earned her the Silver Award for Woman Entrepreneur of the Year.

The phase-out of international garment quotas subsequently triggered an industry-wide shakeout, prompting her strategic transition into another industry.

She later spent nearly a decade with Sierra Holding Group a diversified Conglomerate, serving as an Internal Finance Consultant and Alternate Director, gaining broader experience in corporate finance, business restructuring, governance and strategic management.

Yet through those years in finance and management, the creative instinct remained. Eventually, it found its way back.

Kadapatha — Looking into the Mirror with Confidence

Keshini's creative instincts also found expression through Kadapatha, an established family fashion and retail business with a legacy spanning over two decades.

Meaning "mirror," Kadapatha reflects a philosophy of helping women of all ages and sizes feel fashionable, comfortable and confident in their reflection.

With its flagship store at Crescat Boulevard and a presence at Colombo City Centre, the family business expanded further in 2021 when Keshini opened Kadapatha by Keshi Ann at One Galle Face Mall, bringing her creative vision to the established brand.

Collaborating with designers and curating handpicked collections from global suppliers, Kadapatha also embraces social responsibility through its support of JATAA by Caroline Jurie, an initiative empowering women affected by cancer. Fashion design, interior and visual merchandising, fashion shows and fashion shoots brought together the artist and businesswoman in Keshini.

From a Community Project to a Platform for Community Resilience

Event management had never been part of Keshini's carefully planned career. But when COVID-19 disrupted livelihoods, particularly among micro-entrepreneurs, artisans and home-grown businesses, she saw an urgent need to create opportunities. Drawing on her experience and relationships in business and retail, she launched CAN Market in 2020, despite widespread discouragement and the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic. Navigating lockdowns, changing restrictions and strict social-distancing requirements, CAN adapted its operations to comply with health and safety guidelines, finding ways to keep opportunities alive even in the most challenging circumstances.

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The true measure of leadership is not simply how far you rise, but how many others you help rise with you.

Although many discouraged Keshini from launching CAN Market during the uncertainty of the pandemic, she chose to press ahead, encouraged by those who believed in her vision. She remains deeply grateful for the invaluable support of legendary cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan, Kushil Gunasekera and the Foundation of Goodness, former Mayor of Colombo Rosy Senanayake, and Dilith Jayaweera, whose encouragement and the support extended through Derana TV helped strengthen CAN during its formative years. Their belief in an untested initiative, together with the partnerships and synergies that followed, helped transform a community project into a growing platform for entrepreneurs.

Born during the uncertainty of the pandemic, the initiative carried a message of hope in its very name. CAN stood for Creative Artisans Network, but it also embodied a simple, powerful belief: "We can do it. Together, we can." At a time when so much seemed impossible, CAN became a testament to what could be achieved through resilience, collaboration and collective determination.

Central to CAN's journey has been its longstanding partnership with Shangri-La's One Galle Face Mall, whose willingness to open its doors to micro-entrepreneurs and home-grown brands helped transform a community initiative into a sustainable platform. Keshini remains deeply grateful for the trust and continued support that have sustained this collaboration for nearly six years, creating regular opportunities for artisans to showcase their products and grow their businesses.

Behind those tables were remarkable stories. Women from fishing communities crafted beautiful woven baskets, while home-grown entrepreneurs created recycled and upcycled products, traditional batik, jewellery and natural skincare products.



Varuni Amunugama Fernando, and Madhi Muralitharan with Keshini on women's day at CAN Market

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Creativity and commercial discipline work together

Keshini's background in accountancy, entrepreneurship and art shaped her approach to building businesses that combine financial judgement with creative purpose.

Collaboration creates lasting opportunities

CAN Market grew from a pandemic initiative into a network supporting over 500 artisans and entrepreneurs through partnerships and access to customers.

Resilience extends beyond business

Recovering her speech after a stroke, balancing motherhood and drawing strength from faith deepened her resolve to support others and explore international markets.

They found space to preserve their traditions while innovating. Customers were discovering not merely products, but the people, traditions and stories behind them.

Through its longstanding collaboration with One Galle Face Mall, CAN Market has conducted more than 350 events, growing from a small community of about 50 vendors in 2020 to a thriving network of over 500 artisans and entrepreneurs.

Along the way, CAN Market has created valuable B2B and B2C opportunities, helping home-grown businesses gain visibility, reach new customers and build sustainable livelihoods.

For Keshini, being a pioneer is only the beginning; staying ahead means continually evolving, innovating and raising the bar.

The Many Hats of Resilience

As a mother of two sons and an entrepreneur, Keshini knows that wearing many hats is part of a woman's journey. Entrepreneurship gave her the flexibility to remain present in her children's lives, but balancing motherhood with the demands of running a business often meant long, unpredictable hours and little separation between work and home.

Yet her greatest test of resilience came in 2021, when a stroke temporarily took away her speech. For Keshini, regaining her voice through months of therapy reshaped what resilience meant.

KADAPATHA

BY KESHI ANN

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Shop No: COLOMBO CITY CENTRE - L2 - 11
Shop Tel: 011 20 83111

General line / WhatsApp: 077 080 8847



Muttiah Muralitharan and his wife Madhimalar Muralitharan at the CAN Market launch

It was no longer only about navigating business uncertainty. It was about rebuilding something most people take for granted. Through it all, her Christian faith remained an anchor. As she says, "I think of faith almost as a muscle. Every difficult season exercises it. Every time life asks you to stand again, that faith muscle becomes stronger."

Taking Sri Lankan Creativity to the World

In 2023, Keshini moved to the United Kingdom to pursue better opportunities for her children, while remaining deeply committed to the community of artisans and entrepreneurs she had helped build in Sri Lanka. Continuing to support CAN's operations remotely, she began exploring international opportunities through The Creative Isle, test-marketing Sri Lankan artisan products in the British retail market. The encouraging response reinforced her belief that Sri Lankan craftsmanship and home-grown brands have the potential to reach audiences far beyond the island's shores.

Her vision is to strengthen CAN's presence in Sri Lanka while opening new pathways for local artisans to access global markets.

An Open Invitation to Build Together

Keshini's call is grounded in Sri Lanka's own story of resilience.

Time and again, it has been micro-entrepreneurs, cottage industries and small businesses that quietly continue to create, adapt and find ways forward. Talent alone, however, cannot always build a livelihood. It needs a marketplace - and sometimes, it simply needs someone to open a door.

Today, CAN's database has grown to more than 500 vendors seeking platforms and market opportunities, with many still waiting for the chance to be seen. Alongside its long-standing partnership with One Galle Face, CAN has worked to create additional pop-up opportunities at venues including the World Trade Center, Havelock City Mall, Port City, Arcade Independence Square and the Aitken Spence Head Office. But as the community grows, so does the need for more platforms.

That is why Keshini's message is also an invitation to Sri Lanka's public and private sectors, corporations, institutions, retailers, venues and communities: Open your doors. Create a space. Offer a platform. Help give another artisan, another home-grown brand and another small entrepreneur the chance to be seen.

Because behind every table there is more than a product. There may be a family, a livelihood, a skill passed down through generations, a dream - and sometimes all that dream needs is a place to begin.

"We can do it. Together, we can."

CAN MARKET

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