

To create sustainable businesses we will need role models for young entrepreneurs. Here is one veteran who has made Ireland his home and shown the way to grow value. But now, as **BARRE FITZPATRICK** found out, he is facing the biggest challenge of his life.



Raomal Perera, **Entrepreneur and Survivor**

Harvard's Clayton Christensen wrote a book entitled *How Will You Measure Your Life?* after his recent battle with cancer. In it he says that he asks his students three questions:

1. How can you be sure that you will be happy in your career?
2. How can you be sure that your relationships will become an enduring source of happiness?
3. How can you stay out of jail?

Raomal Perera, serial entrepreneur, answers these questions with confidence, as a family man with a series of business start-ups to his credit. He exudes happiness as he speaks about his business career and family, but a recent diagnosis of Chronic Myeloid Leukemia faced him with 'the biggest battle of all'.

Raomal was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1957. He arrived in Ireland in 1983, having studied electrical engineering at University College, Swansea. He began by working for US multinationals who were setting up R&D facilities here. His first start-up in 1991, ISOCOR (now Critical Path), was an early solution to managing company email traffic. At its peak, it employed 150 people in Dublin, and still has a presence of 80 people, 20 years later. He then founded Network 365 in 1999. A pioneer in mobile commerce before the infrastructure had fully developed, this was nevertheless it was a success, and was listed in Time magazine in 2002 as one of Europe's Hottest Tech Firms. Network 365 acquired US company iPin in 2003, and renamed it Valista. Raomal exited Valista in 2008, and the company was acquired by Aepona a year later.

Now Raomal is Professor of Entrepreneurship at Insead in Paris, and has a string of successful businesses to his credit. These days he is paying more attention to his role as mentor: 'I try to be the mentor I wish I had when I was a young entrepreneur.'

Research shows that small businesses create far more employment than large ones, Raomal Perera explained to me as we spoke near the site of his first venture in Ireland. 'We had 14 staff working in those 2 houses in Dun Laoghaire. It was exciting! The co-founder and I would get away from things by walking down the pier... he swore it was the best way to think things through... and he was right.'

The burst of entrepreneurial activity which spanned those 17 years resulted in 3 business ventures. 'Of course there were mistakes as well along the way', he admits, 'and that is an inevitable part of the entrepreneur's life.' Then, in 2009, he took a new direction, turning his attention towards philanthropy and social enterprise with the establishment of ThousandSeeds (www.thousandseeds.com) with Mary Cronin. A support and development service for entrepreneurs, ThousandSeeds have established an international footprint, working with entrepreneurs globally, from Asia through to North America. They lecture on entrepreneurship at a number of institutions including INSEAD, UCD and DCU, as well as working with a number of entrepreneurial events such as the 'Cartier Women's Initiative' in Paris, the Lean Start-up movement with the UCD/TCD Innovation Academy, and Startup Bootcamp. He is enthusiastic about developing entrepreneurs. 'Nothing is more important than vision,'

he says. 'I like to establish a climate of openness and integrity. One has to acknowledge failure as well as success: and I have had both. But I expect the students to be committed entrepreneurs. While I am good with the ones who are passionate, I am not so good with the ones who are lukewarm and disengaged.'

One thing that he clearly remembers from his time as an entrepreneur was the loneliness of that role. After all, he was a pioneer in two successive waves of innovation: web-enabled communication and mobile payment systems. He has shown great determination to achieve his goals.

Values matter to him. 'If I had not been an engineer, I think I would have been a priest or a teacher', he tells me. Coming from a Christian minority in Sri Lanka, his father was stripped of his land by the government as they divided the whole island into 50-acre lots. 'My father was a paediatrician, and he placed great emphasis on education. He said to us that education was the greatest gift he could give us, as no one can take it away from you – which was proved by what happened to him. He believed that education is freedom – for example freedom to work anywhere in the world, as I have. But he also believed in respect for people as fundamental to everything.'

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He tells a story about a Chinese offer to buy technology he had developed which could highlight the content of text messages. He hesitated before agreeing to close the deal. He had to think carefully about the possible applications of this technology for censorship purposes, and eventually turned them down.

He believes in what he calls the law of attraction: once you nail your colours to the mast, everything begins to work in your favour. 'That is the only way to explain how I got to the World Economic Forum in Davos with Network 365, which was just a small Irish start-up.'

But his courage was put to the test with his recent diagnosis. He underwent a bone marrow transplant in December 2011 and it was his period of isolation in hospital that he compares to Christensen's third question about staying out of jail. It was a low point in his life, and the experience clearly shook him to the core. Now he describes it as 'a great learning experience'. The blog he began there (Raomal.com) as a way to communicate with his four children 'ended up as a great source of positive energy for me.'

His energy restored, he is looking to the future: 'I think I have crossed this bridge as well and so I am getting ready for my next big thing! Maybe another software start-up.' ■