

Finding the upside

By Tori Tragis; photos courtesy of Sam Perera

The rains came to southern Sudan, lowering the temperature from where it hovered just above 120 degrees. Now the temperature averaged a more bearable 112.

Rain is a mixed blessing. "Sudan is so flat that most rural areas in the south get flooded and the people cannot get around for the next five months," **Sam Perera, '96**, writes in an e-mail.

"Because of this immobility and the availability of plenty of water and grass for the cows, there is much less tribal fighting in Sudan during the rainy season.

"Everything here has an upside and a downside, I guess."

Sam specializes in finding and holding on to the upside in some of the most dangerous, slippery-downhill-slope countries in the world. East Timor, Afghanistan, Sudan — even his native country of Sri Lanka, still in the first year of a cease-fire in its bloody civil war — all have made headlines with their carnage. Sam has made them each his home, at least for a time.

For now he's living in Kadugli, about 300 miles southwest of Khartoum, Sudan. Sam is a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration officer with the United Nations peacekeeping mission. His focus is on special-needs groups: child soldiers, disabled and elderly soldiers, and women associated with armed groups, including prostitutes.



Sam registers weapons turned in by a member of the south Sudanese rebel army known as the Sudan People's Liberation Army. One of the stipulations of Sudan's civil war peace agreement is the disarmament and reduction of forces on both sides.

Cross cultures

Sudan's heat is suffocating even for Mohotti Arachchilage Samanatha Perera, known as Sam to nearly everyone outside Sri Lanka, where he was born and raised. His hometown of Colombo is on roughly the same subequatorial latitude as Kadugli.

"My father, who was an English teacher and an avid reader, used to tell me about faraway lands," Sam says. "I remember once when he told me about a place called Siberia where the temperatures went beyond 60 below zero. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that one day I would be actually studying and living in such a place."

Sam applied for a high school study-abroad year with AFS Intercultural Programs, and in 1986 was placed with the Marrs family in Kenai, Alaska.

"Most people around the world form their opinions of the USA through what they see in Hollywood movies and TV," Sam says.

"I wish more people had the privilege of getting to know America the way I have. There would be much less anti-American sentiment around the world."

Sam did well in high school and won a scholarship to UAF. He stayed in Alaska two years after earning his B.B.A., working as a credit manager for a bank in Soldotna and Fairbanks before returning to Sri Lanka.

Leaving Alaska was difficult, because by then Sam had become a father.

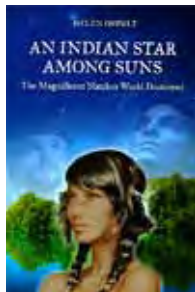
He visits Alaska frequently to see his son, now 14, who lives in Anchorage with his mother. The trips were easier when Sam's job had a more predictable schedule. In early 2001, he relocated to East Timor (now Timor-Leste), as part of a U.N. effort to train the newly formed civil service.

"East Timor was just about to break away from Indonesia and become independent," Sam explains. "Sadly, many lives were destroyed before the Indonesian army and its militias pulled out."

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1950s

Helen Oswalt, '52 — "I am a 1952 U of A grad with a major in anthropology, and I am sending you a historical novel I just published called *An Indian Star Among Suns*. It is now selling on **Amazon.com** and tells a story that will keep anyone absorbed from beginning to end. It describes the dramatic destruction of the Natchez tribe in the late 1700s, but within this setting it focuses on a fictional tale of an unconventional Natchez maiden who falls in love with both a magnificent Indian warrior and a fascinating stranger who comes from the far north to trade."



Jack de Yonge, '56, wrote his childhood memoir of World War II Fairbanks, *Boom Town Boy*, published by Epicenter Press in June. He is a former editor/contributor of *The Sun Star* and had a full career as a journalist and editor at the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

1960s



UAF photo by Todd Paris.

Jennifer Jolis, '69, joined the faculty of the Community and Technical College's culinary arts program in January 2010. (The Tanana Valley Campus was renamed the UAF Community and Technical College in July 2010.)

1970s



UAF photo by Todd Paris.

Tom Albanese, '79, '81, was the UAF commencement speaker in Fairbanks in May. He also received an honorary doctor of science degree at the ceremony. He is the CEO of London-based Rio Tinto, one of the largest mining companies in the world, and is known for steering the company toward a philosophy of sustainability, from an environmental, social and economic standpoint.

1980s

Tom Emmer, '84, is a candidate for governor of Minnesota. He played hockey for the Nanooks while at UAF. He married Jacquie Samuel in 1985, and they have seven children. He was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives in 2004 and re-elected in 2006 and 2008.



UAF photo by Todd Paris.

Rick Caulfield, '86, has been provost at the University of Alaska Southeast since June. He was a faculty member at UAF for more than 25 years and served the last six years as director of the Tanana Valley Campus.

Amy Geiger, '88, joined the staff at the Downtown Association of Fairbanks as community development director in 2009.

Robin W. Riendl, '88, formerly of Smith Barney, opened her own investment firm, Provisio, for wealth advisory and investment management services for small businesses and individuals in Southcentral Alaska. Her prior career was in the resource management industry with firms such as Harding Lawson Associates and the State of Alaska Department of Transportation. She is a member of the PADI Diving Society, and volunteers time and expertise for Shoshin Ryu martial arts.

1990s

Robert Hook, '90, became a faculty member for the Community and Technical College's process technology program in December 2009.

Curtis Thayer, '90, was appointed deputy commissioner of the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development in December 2009.

Dirk Tordoff, '90, '94, head of the Alaska Film Archives at the Rasmuson Library, received the 2010 Edith R. Bullock Prize for Excellence from the UA Foundation.

Max Easley, '91, senior vice president of BP Alaska, was selected as the 2010 College of Engineering and Mines' distinguished alumnus.

Jim Sackett, '91, '00, was selected as CEO for the Toghothle Native Corp. Toghothle focuses on natural resource development of its lands located around Nenana.

Judy Dellinger, '93, is the executive director for Love In The Name of Christ, a faith-based social services clearinghouse in Fairbanks. Judy has been a director of Habitat for Humanity and a grant writer for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center.

Cate Wheeler, '97, married Adam Koss in January 2010.

2000s

Mona Jensen, '01, was promoted in September 2009 to rural court training assistant III with the Alaska Court System. In this new managerial role, she oversees staff at the courts in Aniak, Chevak, Emmonak and St. Mary's, as well as assisting staff at the Bethel court. Mona has worked for the court system since January 2002, starting out as the jury clerk and soon after becoming a judicial assistant to a superior court judge.

Cody Burgess, '05, was hired as the Alaska Nanooks' women's basketball coach at UAF.

Mike Campbell, '05 — "Self-promotion is the best promotion. I won the Civilian Volunteer of the Year Award at Ft. Wainwright and Alaska's Federal Employee of the Year, category V." Mike is the commercial sponsorship and advertising manager for the Directorate of Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation, and serves on a wide variety of community boards, committees and associations, accumulating 800 volunteer hours. "Michael Campbell is known throughout the community for



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www.uaf.edu/alumni/

Credit: D. Derksen/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Calvin J. Lensink, '54, bequeathed a \$650,000 gift to UAF in support of graduate students and research focusing on wildlife management and ecology. The endowment is the largest private gift in the history of the wildlife biology program. Lensink was one of the first five students to graduate from UAF's wildlife program. His long and distinguished career in Alaska is especially notable for his involvement of university graduate students in his research. He epitomized the citizen-scholar, from his UAF master's degree thesis on Alaska pine martens to his 30-year career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Lensink's doctoral dissertation remains the most important record of the history of the Alaska sea otter population.

his passion to help," said M.J. Lohrenz, nominator and DFMWR director. "His motto is 'I can sleep when I die' and the time spent giving back to the community is evident through the hours of service."

Jeff Organek, '05, earned his professional engineering license from the state of Alaska in 2009. He has been with WHPacific's Fairbanks' office as a civil engineer since May 2005, where he is responsible for project management, design development and construction administration on transportation and utility design projects. He has worked in construction trades for more than 10 years, including two years as a construction inspector for an independent materials testing laboratory. He also worked three years for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities' Northern Region Construction Division as an inspector and office engineer.

Colleen Smith, '06, and her students from Barnette Magnet School won first prize for their "SubZero Middle School" project in the annual School of the Future Design Competition.



Sponsored by the Council of Educational Facility Planners International and the National Association of Realtors, the competition challenges middle school teams to think creatively as they design tomorrow's green schools to enhance learning, conserve resources, be environmentally responsive and engage the surrounding community.

Clinton Weter, '07, and his wife, Colleen, celebrated the birth of their son, Falon Taylor Weter on Oct. 10, 2009.

- **Michael Wylie Rogers, '08**, was inducted into the Fairbanks Hockey Hall of Fame College Honor Roll. The honor roll was created to recognize individuals who played youth hockey in Fairbanks and later went on to play college hockey at the NCAA Division I level.

In memoriam

- **Wesley A. Bucher, '75**, June 27, Spearfish, S.D.
- **James Dougherty, '57**, July 8, Fairbanks
- **Erich H. Follmann, wildlife biology faculty member**, July 26, Fairbanks
- **Mary Jane Harris, '88**, July 9, Aberdeen, S.D.
- **Teresa Hartung, Matric.**, June 12, Palmer
- **Brigitte Mayes, associate registrar**, April 27, Fairbanks
- **Lois McNulty, '64**, June 8, Sequim, Wash.
- **Barry McWayne, retired UA Museum of the North fine arts curator**, Aug. 8, Fairbanks
- **Donald B. Rosen, '62**, June 3, Fort Myers, Fla.
- **Nora Laura Sanford, former staff member**, June 8, Tok
- **Samuel W. Stoker, '73, '78**, June 11, Fairbanks
- **Lane S. Thompson, '66**, July 2, Fairbanks
- **Travis E. Thompson, '91**, June 19, Fairbanks
- **Arthur Thomas Tunley, '55**, June 13, Anchorage



Got job changes, family changes, awards to brag about, or do you want to become a member of your alumni association? Visit www.uaf.edu/alumni/ to stay connected. Tell us your good news and we will publish it in the next issue of *Aurora* or the *Alumnus* newsletter. Send photos, too!

President's column

By **Gail Phillips, '67** (past president)

We welcome all new students to the university. We are so glad you have chosen UAF. This is a busy time for you as you get settled in, but we invite you to stop in and visit the alumni office. If there is anything we can do to help your transition to university life, please let us know.

Very special thanks go to all returning students. Without your continued support of the university, many of UAF's programs would be in jeopardy. I hope your summer break went well and that you are ready to hit the books again.

Our annual Reunion Weekend is scheduled for September 23 – 25. This provides a wonderful opportunity for alumni to meet new students and to see old friends. During the awards luncheon, special recognition will be presented to the recipients of the Distinguished Alumnus Award and Alumni Achievement Awards.

As the outgoing president of the alumni association, I congratulate the new members of the alumni board and the new officers, and remind all alumni of the importance of your stewardship commitment to the university. As state and federal dollars decline and the competition for grants increase, the alumni of the university play a greater role in ensuring the strength and viability of the university.

Your alumni association is a dynamic partner to the university, and it is only through continued support of our members that we grow and succeed. Thank you for all you do for the university.



Save the date! **September 23 – 25, 2010**

Four lives, four successes: Northwest Campus' Class of 2010

Northwest Campus is based in Nome, a community of 3,500 that is the service hub for the 15 villages of the Bering Strait region. This 44,000-square-mile region extends from Shishmaref on the northern rim of the Seward Peninsula to Stebbins on the southern edge of Norton Sound, and includes communities on St. Lawrence and Little Diomed islands.

The campus works with regional health and tribal organizations, school districts and corporations to offer education programs that meet regional student and community needs, especially in vocational and business development and cultural preservation. Courses for certificates and associate, bachelor's and master's degrees are taught both in person and by distance delivery. NWC also supports learning centers in Shishmaref and Unalakleet.

Nikki (Polk) Scherer
M.Ed., elementary education

"With UAF's program I was able to student-teach in Nome for a full year, which was very beneficial. I had a great mentor and was able to get a job in Nome."

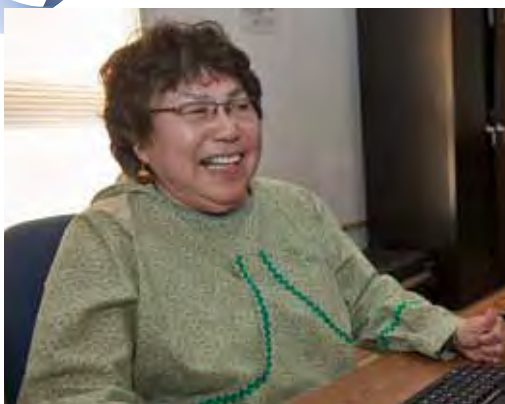


"I had three children before the age of 20 years and was living off of welfare. I knew I needed to further my education in order for my children to have a better lifestyle."

Lisa Haugen
B.A., rural development: rural health and human services management



Marie Katcheak
certificate, high latitude range management



"[The HLRM course] sparked my interest. I could take my time learning with other persons who had reindeer knowledge and the same lifestyle as myself."



Janet Klein
A.A.S., applied business

"Though I have done the same type of work in different areas for over 20+ years, perhaps [my] degree will give some people the idea that administrative work can be a career and has validity."



Read more about these students and their experiences at www.uaf.edu/aurora/.



This spread: UAF photos by Todd Paris.

Sam Perera, continued from page 23

The violence was brutal. Up to a quarter of a million people were killed; hundreds of thousands became refugees. Sam was going to a place where peace existed on paper but not always in practice.

"Forty-two houses of the village I was living in were burned down," Sam says. "My house was also torched, and I lost all my money, passport, clothes, books, etc. When I went back to my house ... angry villagers chased us with machetes and we had to drive [away] fast."

"One of the friendliest guys I've ever met"

Sam has an engaging smile, resonant laughter and a sincere interest in others. When his friends tell funny stories about him there is always genuine affection in their voices. His host parents from high school still speak warmly about the congenial chaos of life with the ever-popular Sam.

"Sam could sing and he was handsome, so he had girls calling the house all the time," Marie Marrs laughs.

Jacob Joseph, one of Sam's former professors at the School of Management, confirms Sam's easygoing social nature. "He can make friends with a dog in the street," Joseph says. "He's just one of the friendliest guys I've ever met. He has a lot of emotional intelligence."

Joseph sees Sam's role as a facilitator in conflict zones as a natural result of two aspects, Sam's character and geography. "If you recall, he's [already] gone through civil war. East Timor, Afghanistan, Sudan, Sri Lanka: all those places have a commonality.

"Given that he had to adapt to another culture, coming from Sri Lanka to the U.S., and then Alaska, which I would say is a culture of its own ... he's shown a lot of adaptability," Joseph says.



Sam (second from left) and U.N. colleagues from India and Afghanistan, in Jalalabad, prepare for a mission to collect heavy weapons. In high school, Sam participated in the National Model United Nations program: "I remember thinking how complicated dealings in the world arena were ... and yet how important it is to maintain a forum [to] carry on some form of a dialog."

Sam had to adapt again when he moved from East Timor to Kabul to hire and train the Afghan staff of the International Rescue Committee, an American nongovernmental organization; the staff eventually grew to about 450. His next assignment, back under the aegis of the U.N., was to educate Afghans about democracy and voting, and later, to run the disarmament office in Jalalabad. ("We collected enough tanks and heavy artillery for several countries.")



Breathing space

Sam has a self-imposed test: "From each country, when I leave, I want to have at least one lifelong friend. This has forced me to try to understand their cultures and ground-realities."

Finding and holding onto common ground is, Sam reasons, as much a part of his job as the actual decommissioning.

"Just being in these countries, we provide the ordinary people some breathing space and a respite from brutal violence."

Sam's job is to turn swords into ploughshares, trade ammo packs for seed packets. But part of his heart is always with a baby girl in Sri Lanka. Sam married in 2008, and in late 2009 his wife, Nadee, gave birth to their daughter.

"My instinct is to return to Sri Lanka immediately to be with the family, but now I have to think of my daughter's future also," he says, explaining that he plans to stay in Sudan until the peace-keeping mission ends in 2011. By then he hopes his professional experience will be enough to secure a position in Sri Lanka to help in the rebuilding efforts there.

"Living in so many places and working in so many difficult places has indeed changed me as a person," he notes. "After seeing what people have gone through during brutal wars, I am grateful for the life I have."

"You will never hear me complaining about trivial things."



Tori Tragis, '94, '99, is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications.