

JULY 2007

INDIA
TODAY

Woman

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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THE PERSONNEL TOUCH

HUL Executive Director **LEENA NAIR** on life in and out of office

PHOTO: SURESH K. VISWANATHAN
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HAIR: ANITA SINGH
MAKEUP: ANITA SINGH
DRESS: ANITA SINGH
JEWELRY: ANITA SINGH
PROP: ANITA SINGH
SET: ANITA SINGH
CATERING: ANITA SINGH
DRINKS: ANITA SINGH
MUSIC: ANITA SINGH
SOUND: ANITA SINGH
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On Her Toes

A woman apart. Standing tall in the male-dominated management committee of HUL, Leena Nair, Executive Director, HR, makes a mark in her every endeavour.

SHRINA PATIL



On her Toes

The first woman to make it to the management committee of the Rs 12,000-crore Hindustan Unilever Limited, Leena Nair is super mom, marathon runner and boss to 15,000 employees.

By DEVAYANI SHAHANE

IT'S 9 a.m. Leena Nair, Executive Director, HR, Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), and the first woman to make it to the Rs 12,000-crore FMCG company's management committee in India, has already been awake for three hours. She has worked out with husband Kumar Nair; packed off her children, nine-year-old Aryan and five-year-old Sidhant, to Cathedral and John Connon School; and inspected the ongoing refurbishment of her home, on the 29th floor of an apartment offering a spectacular view of the Mumbai's Mahalakshmi racecourse.

But there's no sign of chaos or confusion in Nair's office in Backbay Reclamation. Adorned with miniature Ganesh idols, inspirational quotations and family pictures, this is clearly her second home. It is here that the 37-year-old will conduct yet another workday brimming over with conference calls, seminars, management meetings, and union updates. After that it's home by 9 p.m.—by which time

**PEOPLE'S
PERSON:
Nair at work**

I believe in setting benchmarks. I am a demanding person, mostly on myself, but I am open to discussion critical in my field.

know where Kolhapur, where she spent her childhood, was on the map. Her family moved from Kodungallur, Kerala, to Kolhapur in Maharashtra in search of opportunities. The beginning was humble, but the family grew to be 'decently' successful, says Nair. "As I was one of the youngest in the joint family, I did not personally experience much of the early struggle but heard of it from my older cousins. It was inspirational, and has kept me grounded," she says—so today though her chauffeur can drive her around the city in a swanky Chevrolet Optra, she can't forget the 12 km she cycled every day to get to college. Or that it was her mother who kept her company, brewing hot coffee as she sat up studying through the night. As much as possible, she would like to channel that dedication. An involved parent, she attends PTA meetings, open days and declines dinner invitations if children aren't in-

the family will have eaten, but there will be homework, tuck-in for the children, and catch-up time with the husband. That's when she is not traveling, which is at least once a week every month.

After 15 years in HUL, Nair is a force to reckon with, with a string of firsts behind her. She was the first woman to become GM, Vice President and now Executive Director. During her tenure, in the last seven years, the percentage of women employees at HUL has risen from two to 16 per cent. Whether it was restructuring at the Ambattur factory of HUL, where she was gheraoed by workers, or her 1994-1996 stint as personnel manager at the Talaja Chemicals factory, she's been through the grind, talking to wives of alcoholic workers or placating fighting factions. Her finest hour though was when she managed the HR impact when HUL shifted its food business from Bangalore to Mumbai. Within six months, Nair and her team worked out plans to relocate spouses, organise school admissions, manage loans, and ensure placements where necessary. "Some people were devastated when this shift was announced, but when they look back they are happy with the results. This gave them the opportunity to explore territories they'd never considered," she says.

Today, strategic HR is being adopted by several companies, but when HUL announced its plans, it was in its nascent stages. "Six years ago, I was brought in as an HR business partner to play a strategic role. It was a huge challenge because I was accountable for business results. There was no role model to draw inspiration from. It was a new way of running HR within a business and by using HUL tools I had to identify and groom leaders, look at people's capabilities and maximise output." She played an important role in the harmonising process of the detergent and personal product divisions in 2004 too. Now, from being one of 18 women among 3,000 men at Walehand



5 MUST-HAVES FOR A CORPORATE PROFESSIONAL

- 1 Laptop.
- 2 BlackBerry. Imperative especially on long drives.
- 3 The ability to listen.
- 4 iPod and track pants to change into and run or walk when you get the opportunity.
- 5 A sense of humour.

Collegè in Sangli, she heads a team of 250 people that looks into the well being of about 15,000 people across 70 different locations, among them 45 factories and four regional offices.

No wonder then she is an HUL Lister. "Being a Lister brings a reward and development tool where you're given projects that challenge and stretch you to your limits. It brings expectations, but you've to take it in your stride and surge ahead. I believe in setting benchmarks. I am a demanding person, mostly on myself, but I am open to discussion, which is critical in my field," she says.

Between supervising her sons' homework, convincing warring unions to work together or training for the Mumbai marathon, she rarely, if ever, misses a beat. And to think when the engineering graduate got into XLRI in Jamshedpur for a management degree, most of her classmates didn't even

involved, all this while keeping a hawk's eye on their academics. Weekends are reserved for them when she plays Beyblade, Pokemon and WWF cards. "Motherhood is great. It makes you patient and tolerant," she says.

Today, she believes that in the changing business environment,

It doesn't matter what cards you are dealt. What matters is the way you play your cards. So I don't spend time complaining, but focus on getting the job done.

women have a big role to play. "But I do not believe I am a superwoman and nothing would have been possible without a sound support system. If you don't have it, you should not even consider trying to strike the career-home balance." Support comes in ample measure, from her spouse, while parents, in laws, and an efficient domestic staff also pitch in. Her husband Kumar, who runs a financial company, Trans Warranty, is her "anchor". The influence he has on her dates back to the time they were courting. "I was pleasantly plump in my days at XLRI," she says. But armed with the desire to shed those kilos, she got herself a dietician and a fitness regime and lost 20 kg. Keeping fit is on top of her agenda till today. The couple has a trainer and practise diligently. For the past two years they've been running the Standard Chartered Mumbai half marathon. Leena stood 16 last year among 500 women in her age group.

She also attributes her selection of

5 TIPS TO KEEP FIT

- 1 Watch what you eat. Whenever possible, switch to healthy alternatives.
- 2 Use the stairs every time in the office. Forget the elevator.
- 3 Have a target figure and make sure you are weighing yourself every week to stay on course.
- 4 Build exercise into at least four of the seven days in a week. Running is a great option. You burn a lot of calories
- 5 Develop exercise routines with your spouse. You can catch up and get exercise.

READY, STEADY:
Nair in training



SHRUTI PATIL

BIG MOMMA:
Nair with Aryan,
9 and Sidhant, 5



5 TIPS FOR RAISING BOYS

- 1 Find ways to keep them occupied and burn their energy.
- 2 Expect high levels of physical activity like pillow fights and boxing bouts. Have furniture that can withstand extreme assault.
- 3 Never ask "what happened at school today". Be patient. They'll share when they feel the need.
- 4 Familiarise yourself with gameboy, Playstation and X-box.
- 5 The siblings will have a great relationship. So don't fret beyond a point when they seem ready to kill each other.

clothes to her husband. "I was a tomboy while growing up, and wore a uniform while at the HUL factory. It is only now, with every promotion, that I have got conscious about my dressing," she says. She loves cooking and weekends see her dishing out Thai, Chinese and coastal cuisine as well as Kolhapuri mutton. "Whenever I have guests at home, my table is creaking under the weight of food, and I never think it is enough," she says. "I always understood the rules of the game and played well, whether it meant losing weight or cooking," she adds.

Which explains her irresistible rise. In her third year at Walchand College, she says, "I realised I enjoyed working with people. I used to gravitate toward people-oriented projects and used to get nominated for leadership roles. That's when I realised I needed a shift in orientation." Exposed to the world of management by R. R. Tilwalli—"He used to take a manage-

I am not a superwoman and nothing would have been possible without a support system. Without it, you can't strike a balance.

ment course which fascinated me," she says—she opted for HR at a time when it wasn't evolved. Now she believes it is the future of all corporates. "If you ask any business head what gives him sleepless nights, it would be attracting the right kind of talent, retaining them and building on their capability. Leadership is a huge HR challenge. How do you keep people engaged, and continue to excite them. HR, I believe, is in the co-driver's seat," she says.

But Nair is not just about unions, relocations and retrenchments. Scratch the surface of the busy working woman and there is still a bubbly girl, who loves a *Kajrare* as much as she does a rollercoaster ride. And God. Nair visits the Babulnath and Siddhivinayak temples every week and believes there is nothing that "prayer and positive thinking cannot achieve," she says. "It does not matter what cards you are dealt, what matters is the manner in which you play your cards. So, I never spend time complaining about the task at hand, instead I focus my energy on getting the job done. Whenever a challenge is posed to me, I just take a deep breath and tackle it head on. There is no room for short cuts," she says. In life or at work. ♀