



PLUS

From then to now; Visakhians making a name for themselves

By K. de Silva

Visakha Vidyalaya, Colombo, celebrates 100 years

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Founder: Mrs. Jeremias Dias

Visakha Vidyalaya, Colombo, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, enjoying the prestigious position that it gained at its inception when Jeremias Dias, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake, and then Governor Sir Herbert Stanley graced the opening. Visakha Vidyalaya since then has produced leaders in every field.

Begun under the name of "Buddhist Girls' College" in a house called "The Firs" at Turret Road, Colombo, it was moved to its present premises at Vajira Road on November 21, 1927 and named "Visakha Vidyalaya" by Lady Stanley, the wife of the Governor of Ceylon.

Starting with just 20 students in 1917, Visakha has about 5,000 students now, with an academic staff numbering 146. Visakha is known for its academic excellence and distinguished record in extra-curricular activities. As Visakha celebrates its centenary year, it is apt that we recall some of the scholars who made Visakha what it is and their significant achievements.

The first name that pops up when recalling eminent Visakhians is Sumitra Peiris, the first qualified Sri Lankan woman filmmaker and Lanka's Ambassador to France, Spain and the United Nations in the late 1990s.

Preethi de Silva, harpsichordist and fortepianist is Emerita Professor of Music of Scripps College, founder and artistic director of Con Gioia, and has performed extensively as soloist and chamber musician, and lecturer in the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's very own golden voiced soprano Kishani Jayasinghe Wijeysekera is the first South Asian and Sri Lankan soloist to sing at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 2006 and the only soprano be chosen for the world renowned Jette Parker Young Artist programme at the Royal Opera House. Apart from achievements in the UK, she travels around the world winning numerous awards and tributes as she performs.

Venturing into the field of science and medicine, we come across Dr Kamini Mendis, malaria expert and former WHO official at WHO Headquarters, the first Sri Lankan on the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee; Emeritus Professor of Pharmacology Anoja Fernando who was recently appointed to the UNESCO IBC, a body of 36 independent experts that follows progress in the life sciences and its applications; and Dr Binodh de Silva, the first Sri Lankan to be elected as President-elect of the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists.

In the field of law, we have the historic appointment of Indira Samarasinghe, the first woman to hold the important post of Principal of the Sri Lanka Law College in its over-140 year history. Sita Rajasuriya was also a first in her field becoming the Chief Commissioner of the Sri Lanka Girl Guides Association. She was the first Sri Lankan to be elected to the World Committee of the Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, the first and only Asian to Chair a World Conference and the first Chairman of the Asia Pacific Region.

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Priyani Wijeyesekera, the former Secretary General of Parliament is also a Visakhian.

Anoja Wijesekera, former international civil servant has made a name for herself internationally for her work with the UNICEF, especially following her posting in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 1997. She was finally the UNICEF representative in Bhutan before retirement. and was subsequently appointed Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Indonesia.

More recently, in the field of commerce and trade, past Visakhian Indira Malwatte became the first woman to lead the Export Development Board.

In the education sector is the much respected Dr. Tara de Mel, former Secretary to the Minister of Education. Another was Prof. Nandani de Silva as the new Vice Chancellor of the Open University of Sri Lanka who has introduced many innovations in teaching and research, and more recently, Nilakshi Parndigamage was appointed the Dean of Ezra Stiles, one of the undergraduate colleges at Yale University.



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Jeewika Ranawera is a leading woman engineer who develops high-speed microprocessors at Oracle in the Silicon Valley. An IEEE senior member and active in IEEE Women in Engineering, Jeewika has four U.S. patents. Niranjanie Ratnayake, Senior Professor in Civil Engineering, Head of the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Moratuwa was elected to be the President of the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka (IESL) for 2017/2018 in October 2016. Prof. Dileeka Dias, Professor of Electronic and Telecommunication Engineering at the University of Moratuwa is the founder Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

Visakhians are leaders in world class universities – Sujeeva Setunge is the Deputy Dean, Research and Innovation for Engineering at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. Associate Professor of Computer Science at the University of Melbourne Shanika Karunasekera is another who has made her mark in the engineering field. Prof. Dilanthi Amaratunga is a Professor of Disaster Risk Management at the University of Huddersfield, UK, who leads the Global Disaster Resilience Centre at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

Also Prof. Hiranya Peiris is an internationally known cosmologist who has made major contributions to the current understanding of the origin and evolution of our Universe. Her work has been recognised by many international awards and she currently serves as Vice-President of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Dr. Shahani Markus is another Visakhian, an IT entrepreneur with an illustrious 20+ year global professional career spanning the IT industry, government and academia. She is the Founder, CEO and Chairperson of Emojot Inc.

The list goes on .....too many for one article.

The young generation too is following in the footsteps of past Visakhians, creating a name for themselves. The school thus has reason to celebrate this year, claiming 2017 as the year of Visakhians!

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