

TRIBUTES

A tribute to an esteemed and distinguished personality in the academic and scientific world who passed away on the 10th December 2020 - Professor Eugene Ramya Wikramanayake (nee Jayasekara) - “Anatomy and Human Genetics Educator”

My association with Eugene Wikramanayake dates back to almost 70 years - a chance meeting of two teenagers at the Peradeniya railway station, strangers to one another but heading to the same destination, the University of Colombo to commence our undergraduate career in medicine. We shared our student days leading to our graduation. Our professional lives ran parallel as we followed the same appointments as interns, and later joined as academics to pursue a career in anatomy. We remained good friends throughout these years sharing our experiences, our achievements and interacting socially with our batchmates till the very end.

We were the batch of 1952 -1958, comprising 110 from all parts of the country. Eugene was one of the brighter students of what was believed to be an exceptional batch. She was Intelligent, quick to absorb facts, clear in her thinking, critical and precise, qualities we saw as images of a future academic. She also displayed an intellectual maturity and a philosophical attitude which was well above of what was expected of one her age. May be it was these qualities that guided her in the choice of her life partner, Tommy Wikramanayake, someone more mature than her who could match her in her intellect and thoughts.

She joined the Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya at its inception in 1962 and walked through all



Emeritus Prof Eugene Wickramanayake in 2016

levels expected of an academic ending up as Senior Professor of Anatomy in 1988; after 38 years of dedicated service she retired in 2000.

1965 was a significant milestone in her academic career when she commenced her postgraduate training at the Institute of Genetics of the Faculty of Science, University of Glasgow UK, where she read for PHD in Genetics under the supervision of Professor Guido "Ponte" Pontecorvo, an outstanding researcher in genetics. Ponte (his nickname), was the University's first Professor of Genetics (1955 to 1968), and has been described as "one of the founding fathers of modern genetics". Working with "Ponto" was a stimulating experience for it is here that she understood the fundamentals of genetics, the concept of



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life in its entirety while unravelling its secrets down to a molecular level. Her thesis for her PhD in Human Genetics in 1968 was titled "Localisation of Autosomal genes in Man using Chromosomal aberrations"



Prof. Eugene Wickramanayake at the IVth International Congress in Human Genetics, Paris 1971

Realising the scope and future of this up and coming discipline and the importance of introducing the basic understanding of genetics into the minds of young scientist, on her return to Sri Lanka she introduced the course in genetics into the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum. She also initiated research in Human Cytogenetics, Population Genetics and Physical Anthropology.

Professor Eugene always felt the need to move away from the traditional preclinical curriculum. Anatomy had to be viewed in a wider perspective, as a basic science to be integrated with other disciplines to give a

comprehensive and in depth understanding of the human body. She designed and implemented courses in the Neurosciences, Human Reproduction, Genetics, Molecular Biology, Embryogenesis, Histogenesis and Human Evolution into the medical curriculum Later when the Peradeniya Medical School introduced the concept of "Study of Man in Health and Disease" she reoriented the curriculum integrating Anatomy with the clinical disciplines.

Being an avid, continuing learner, her thirst for knowledge was phenomenal. Her learning was built on fundamentals, translating them in her mind to facts. This gave her a clear and succinct understanding of the subject and the ability to retain this knowledge and to precisely transfer it to others.

One of her students and later a colleague aptly demonstrated this by saying

"That is the time I realized the true picture of Prof. Eugene Wickramanayake.

If I am to be very honest with myself I would say she is the best Anatomist I have seen in my life.

She was highly intellectual and had a holistic idea about the human body. She remembered the anatomical facts as concepts and grasps the three dimensional aspect with its evolutionary aspects as well. I know very well-it just registers for life." He adds – "Now, that is pure wisdom" (Professor DJ Anthony)

Her vast knowledge and the volumes of information that she collected from subjects ranging from medicine, anatomy and science,

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to arts, philosophy literature had to be stored in her mind for later use. How else could she have done it!

Her vocation for teaching was to aid the learning of others. Dedicated to student learning and their success, generations of students now professionals (doctors, scientists, academics) have benefitted from her teaching and remember her with gratitude and affection. She was a mentor par excellence to them all and would always find the time to offer valued and valuable advice.

Her research interests centred around Human Cytogenetics, Population Genetics and Physical Anthropology were later extended into biometry, male Infertility and human sociality. One of her main fields of interest was "Veddhas of Sri Lanka". A review of twenty five years of research on the Veddhas of Uva-Bintenna was published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka. in 2002. Her studies on analysis of morphological variation in Sri Lankan communities were presented at archaeological seminars in Peradeniya and Ruhuna

Professor Eugene always kept abreast with recent advances in Genetics, Molecular Biology, Human Reproduction and Anthropology. She often presented papers and participated at international and national conferences. As an active member of the SriLankan scientific and medical associations she never failed to attend any of the annual academic sessions whether they be in Kandy,

Colombo, or any other part of the country.

Public transport was always available if there was no other means of travel. It is said that young scientists would virtually "shiver in their boots" when they made a presentation at a conference where she was present. Question would be hurled at them with abject criticism sometimes literally tearing their presentation to bits - but there was nothing personal. Criticisms were constructive, accurate, helpful, appreciated and accepted by the presenter

Professor Eugene Wikramayake had many achievements and received many honours throughout her illustrious career, yet was always an epitome of simplicity with her modest, engaging and generous nature. Her slight frame always draped in a simple cotton sari, her countenance a symbol of inquiry and her sometimes rough exterior - masked a vibrant personality with a fount of wisdom and knowledge that has touched the minds and lives of many generations.

She was indeed an amazing lady who will be sorely missed not only by the academic community but by all who knew her.

May she attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana

Professor Shanti Goonewardene (nee Gautamadasa)

Anatomist,

Faculty of Medicine,

University of Colombo (1962 to 2000)

Faculty of Medicine SAIMM (2009 to 2018)