

My Sixth Form Years 1960 - 61

by
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It is indeed a wonderful experience to look back on one's life 40 years after leaving school. I was 18 then; life was beautiful and saw the world in vivid technicolor. Disagreements, disappointments and the heartaches seem to be all forgotten and all I can remember now are the pleasant memories of happy times. I recall the sunshine and the warmth and not the monsoon rains. Anecdotes and images appear at random. The innocence of the fifties gave way to the cynical and raucous sixties.

After 10 long years at school I had reached the top of the pile. On a cold January morning I climbed the steps in front of the school office and found my way up the wooden stairs by the Physics Lab. At the top there was the unmistakable pungent smell of acids and alkalis coming directly from the Chemistry Lab. Down 2 steps and I was on the corridor leading to the Biology Lab where the acrid smell of formalin greeted me. This was to be my domain for a memorable 2 years. On many occasions I have looked out of the Biology Lab window towards the Principals bungalow. It had a lovely porch and verandah and a well manicured lawn surrounded by large spreading Flamboyant trees. This picture still haunts me. I think this idyllic scene brought some calmness and serenity to the otherwise rowdy bunch that formed my class. From the "Biology" corridor there was a lovely view of the front drive, The Tamarind tree and the Welikada Prison and the steady stream of Morris Minor cabs, red Leyland buses and bullock carts. There was a rather lonely road just in front of the school gates leading away from Baseline road by the tall perimeter wall of the Prison. This went in the direction of Wanathamulla. Every morning the prisoners wearing white were taken along this narrow road by the Guards in Khaki shorts.

We were to sit the extremely competitive University Entrance Examination in 2 years. Charles Yesudian taught us Zoology. He was one of many fine South Indian teachers who came over to Ceylon in the 1940's to share their knowledge. Mr. Yesudian was from the Southern tip of Cape Cormarin in Nagercoil. He was always smiling and had a benign and calming effect on everyone. His amiable sense of humour was always close to the surface, and he was enormously

self-satisfied. Popular and respected, he taught with authority and dictated his lectures, which all the students copied down. We were immediately impressed by his considerable intelligence, ability and above all his energy. He set tremendously high standards for himself and for his students. His transparent enthusiasm for Biology was quite contagious and always extracted the best from us all. He is one of the most extraordinary characters I have met in my life. He spent his life studying and teaching biology. I have never known anyone with a better knowledge of it. He was meticulous and methodical. We couldn't have had a better preparation. Botany was taught by Mr. Suntharalingam. Without being unkind to him it would be fair to say he lacked teaching experience to teach at this level. He covered the syllabus but had difficulty in controlling the class. His sentences seriously fractured the Queen's English. His periods were a riot and 45 minutes of mayhem. Mr. L.A Fernando was the Chemistry teacher. He was excellent and commanded respect and received it. He was a most impressive teacher and I admire him for the effort he put into his teaching and his magnificent attempts to get us through the exams. Physics guru was Mr. Chanthirasekeran, the quaint gaunt, saint. He was a good reliable teacher. He was a quiet man who rarely smiled but had a benign and calming influence on us all. VC had an excellent knowledge of the subject and we had confidence in him. I recall the many physics practicals he worked out for us and the scores of difficult sums from the past question papers. After some years he left Wesley to work in Zambia and then in Toronto where he died at the relatively young age of 66. We had a few English classes too taken by Mr. David Joseph. I remember a discussion about imagery by our public speakers. Mr. D.S. Senanayake in a speech said "with our eyes looking towards the stars and the feet firmly planted on the ground let us walk boldly forwards towards freedom". These erudite discussions were well received. When in London in 1974 I asked a friend the directions to the Ceylon Students Centre. He asked me to get off at the Lancaster Gate Tube Station and follow the Curry smell. He was absolutely correct. I was so pleased to see Mr. Joseph at the Students Centre. Over a "buth curry" we spoke of the good old days and the not so good idiosyncrasies at Wesley. He had finished a teaching assignment in Ethiopia and was on his way back home before the horn of Africa erupted into civil war.

The battle of the Sixes was a cricket match between the Arts and Science students in the 6th Form. It was a wonderful occasion of fun and privilege when the rest of the school was hard at work. I must not give you the impression that it was all fun and games. Although I have always wanted to be one of the gang

I was deeply aware of my goal to enter Medical College and never stopped working for it. On looking back my stamina for work at the time still amazes me. There were the syllabuses to cover and the revision to do and there was no end to the work. In the lower sixth life was easier and we made full use of it. We watched the cricket matches with great keenness as we had our own man Lalith Wijesinghe in the team. We became active spectators attending in large groups. The highlight of the lower sixth was the School Fete with an excellent science exhibition. Soon the upper Sixth was upon us and the work began in earnest. The Exams were held in December. We had 3 months of virtual study leave as most syllabuses were covered. We went to school on odd days to do some practicals. The tension was getting to us and life became hard. There were stories that the exam papers had leaked as it often happened. The theory exam was held at Visakha Vidyalaya in Bambalapitiya and the Practical at the University at Reid Avenue. The results were posted to us in March. On that fateful day Sarath Ranasinghe and Lakshman Jayasinghe received letters inviting them for an interview prior to entry to Medical College. I was disappointed but not surprised not to receive an invitation. Several days passed and I had arranged all my books for a second assault in December. Many commiserated with me which I think I accepted with grace. It was Mr.L.A. Fernando who personally brought my letter which had been mislaid by the post office. I was ecstatic and he was too. I sold all my books and celebrated not with a drink as we would do now but by going to the Cinema which in those days was a special treat.

I remember my last day at school. I went to assembly virtually through the back door and sat in the balcony. After being in this protected environment I was at times fearful of feeling lost in the big world outside. The world was spinning around me. There was a cricket match that day and the boys sang the school song. I couldn't hold back my tears but was too shy to show it. I stayed behind for the short Christian Service. Mr.L.A.Fernando read a passage from the Bible and we all sang

Guide me Oh Thou Great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak but thou art mighty
Help me with Thy powerful hand."

It is my favourite Hymn and I thought we lifted the roof as we sang. I now have a recording of this Hymn sung by the Kings College Choir Cambridge to remind me of my last day at school. I remember walking back to my usual haunt- the Bio Lab where the boys had gathered on this final day. Wesley has been my whole life so far. It was strange and

desperately sad to leave the life I knew and loved. But there was a whole new world before me. Saying goodbye to my friends must have been the hardest thing I've had to do. We vowed to meet up again in 20 years, in the Bio Lab. Forty years have now passed and those vows remain unpaid and forgotten. I still recall my lonely walk after the good byes and seeing over my shoulder the magnificent buildings of the school - an image that has stayed with me ever since. Even after all these years it pains me deeply to think of the Principals, teachers and students who have now departed this world and was then an important part of my life. If I ever have a regret it is that I should have shaken the hands of all the teachers on my last day at school from the Primary School upwards for many of them I never saw again.

During my 5 years in Medical College I may have visited the school twice. Each time I found myself a stranger in the place which was my home for over a decade. My friends had left by then and some of the teachers too. The loss of the Small Park was a heavy blow to many of us. I was not to set foot on those hallowed grounds again for another 20 years. In those years I left Sri Lanka, carved myself a career and raised a family. I often spoke to my 2 sons of the halcyon days at Wesley College and it was they who wanted to see this magical school they have heard so much about. It was a most memorable trip in 1992 when we visited the hostel, classrooms, assembly hall, and library and walked along the narrow paths amidst the lovely flamboyant trees then in full bloom. Mr. Wijemanne greeted us with a broad smile and took us to his new Tuck Shop. He was a man who was there when I started school in 1950 and when I left in 1962. We reminisced at length. It pained me to hear of his death some years later. The long corridors and the notice boards had the feel of the 1950's but a lot has changed mostly for the better. I left with my affection for the school rekindled. It was not until the new millennium did I have the time to look back, recall and write about my life and friends. The sixth form years were the best I've had at school.

In those days for anyone studying the Sciences the choice was rather limited, being confined to Medicine, Biological Sciences, Agriculture and Engineering. There was a belief that entry into Medical College was a passport to Nirvana. That was just an illusion which for a few turned out to be a nightmare. It was only the beginning of a long struggle with busy days and sleepless nights. I hope this popular misconception has now been properly addressed. If I am allowed to be cynical - it is no more a noble profession but a kind of business making a living on others' misfortune, just like the lawyers. A "Medical Mudalali" is a term more suited as avarice and greed has taken over this profession.

As I look around the various professions their nobility has been eroded by the pressures of modern living, as a 6th former in the sixties I wasn't to know all that.

A professional career with its disruptive routines and untold strain on my time and leisure has invariably taken its toll. I now look forward to the end of my career with the same excitement as its beginning. Going back to that January morning climb up the wooden stairs I would never have imagined life would turn out this way. Call it destiny or the will of God, good fortune has been on my side most of the way.

SENIOR WESLEYITES GET TOGETHER

The annual Christmas luncheon for senior members of the O.B.U. and their spouses on 12th December launched the calendar of events for the year ahead, when we will celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Old Boys' Union in Australia.

Attendance was at a record high. Among the guests were past Wesleyites Nattie Prius, Anton Blacker, Gerald de Zilwa, Douglas Mack, Vernon Nugara and Glyn Lappen; from the latter years we met Arthlow Chapman, Charles Swan, Sam Daniel and Brian Miller and a few others from that era.

A trio of musicians provided a lively background to the afternoon, and after lunch and a few old-time classics sung by Harry de Vos straight from his Minstrel shows, everyone joined in singing a selection of Carols and Christmas songs.

An special celebration of the afternoon was the 62nd Wedding Anniversary of Vernon & Myrtle Nugara. They danced to a rendition of the Anniversary Waltz. Guests and committee members joined in the Ballroom dancing.



Thanks to everyone who helped to make the occasion such a happy time, especially all our Senior Wesleyites and their spouses.

Lunch with the Claessens

A group of old Wesleyites and their partners recently called on Bryan Claessen on their way to Adelaide for a week's holiday.



I do not think that any Wesleyite who knew Bryan would ever want to drive past his place without visiting him and his lovely wife Carol. They have a few acres at Tailem Bend, in South Australia, about three hours drive from Adelaide. The mighty Murray River winds its course through Tailem Bend, hence the name.

There were ten of us – Rod de Kretser and Marie, Trevor Collette and Jill, Robin Reimers and Trilby, George Robertson and Beryl, all Wesleyites, plus Trevor Newman and his wife Sandra. (This Trevor went to St. Josephs but we'll ignore that).

It was a pleasure to meet my old classmate after so many years, and we talked of many things, and joked and laughed at the memories we shared. Those who know of Bryan's cricket career and accomplishments will remember him as the finest schoolboy cricketer of his time, and it was good to hear Bryan recall some of his experiences from those bygone days.

They have worked very hard, Bryan and Carol, to make their home a pleasant place to live in and have always welcomed visitors who drop by especially if they hail from that School in Baseline Road, opposite the Jail.

Bryan looks well, but takes things a little easier now, as we all do. Nevertheless, his sense of humour and his outlook on life are very positive. He is a well-respected and popular member of his community, sharing in all the activities they undertake.

Bryan and Carol go dancing, Carol is a keen gardener and together they have worked to make a home from a piece of land where once was nothing.



It was also an opportunity to meet up again with Radley and Angela Claessen at a Dance to usher in the New Year and later to have a drink and a chat with them when we were invited for "Kiri Buth" and Seeni Sambol" at the home of Ron Foenander, our host.
