

“Even in adversity, there’s a lot to learn”

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Adhering to the ‘new normal’, we had a friendly yet meaningful conversation with a very interesting person. It was none other than Prof. Janaki Hewawisenth, the Dean of the Medical Faculty of University of Kelaniya .

How can one’s experience during university life contribute to their future career? Can you tell us your experience?

To be very honest, during my university life, never in my wildest dreams did I think I’ll end up being a dean. I looked at my former deans and professors in awe and thought they were so far above me and never ever pictured myself in their position one day. So, this was not a journey I envisaged or planned for. My only objective during university was to get an MBBS degree and get out of university.

I just wanted the five years to end, but in my case, the five turned out to be seven or more years. There were many things that happened in the university which probably shaped my life. For two years, our universities were closed due to various issues. During those two years, I studied CIMA (accountancy) and did a job as well. At that time, I didn’t think it would help me in any way, but meeting people in the corporate sector, learning business-related subjects made me a more balanced person. I

could see things from outside the perspective of a doctor, which I think sometimes helps especially, when you come to this level and become an administrator.

Having said that there are several other things in medical school that shaped my life. I remember when I was a 3rd or a 4th year medical student, Prof. Harsha Seneviratne (professor in gynaecology and obstetrics), asking me to do a lecture on “ Immunological aspects of Pregnancy” to final year professorial students and postgraduate students, which was quite a daunting task at that point in time. I was actually quite angry with him, for hoisting this on me and spent over a week fretting over this. But after I did the presentation, I felt very good about it and I always think of this as a starting point in my career as a medical teacher.

Your expertise is in Gastrointestinal (GI) and liver pathology. What made you choose pathology as your specialty and develop your interest in liver and GI tract?

Firstly, I liked pathology as a medical student. It was maybe not my favorite subject but I was quite enthralled with it, but when I chose pathology for my career, one of the key things that I considered was the work-life balance, especially balancing family life. The work in pathology is more ordered so that one can have a degree of control over the work and streamline it when necessary. Having chosen pathology though, I felt there was a bit of a vacuum in that I didn’t have any patient contact. I like people contact and that was missing in pathology, but this was greatly reduced because as a teacher, I had a great deal of student contact instead.

Madam you were the first Sri Lankan pathologist to be awarded the prestigious South Asian Academy of Cytopathology & Histopathology (SACH) Oration in 2016. As a successful researcher, what advice would you give to medical students who are interested in making achievements in the research sector?

First of all, I have to say my research has always been clinically oriented and the work I presented in this oration was all about the 20 years or more of experience in inflammatory bowel disease that I had gathered during my routine practice. I have to admit that I have not been a pure researcher involved in molecular based research or experimental research.

Then again, my advice to students would depend on whether they are highly research oriented and want to go into pure research, or whether you want to balance your clinical activities with research. Even in the latter instance, there is a lot of scope, because there are many clinical aspects that you can research into, especially in this part of the world. There are a lot of unanswered questions with regard to Asian patients, as we follow western guidelines with regard to many diseases.

So, my advice is when you are starting as a researcher, if there are things that attract your attention or questions that arise in your mind, try to collect data to answer your questions. That is what basically research is about. That was exactly what I did.

Thank you madam, so if we move on to your personal life, I'm pretty sure there must have been many events in both your professional and personal lives that shaped you as a doctor, as well as an individual. Would you care to share a few with us?

I really don't know where to start because I think a lot of your personality develops through the life experiences you've had. Starting as a schoolgirl or from my time before being a medical student and a doctor, I think my experiences in school shaped my personality because I was somebody who got involved in a lot of extra curricular activities. I was a girl guide, a debater and I did a bit of sports too. All that helped me to build up my soft skills such as teamwork, leadership and communication skills.

As a teacher, interestingly, what helped me to realize certain things about teaching was my son! When I had to teach him, I realized that he learnt quite differently from the way I learnt or my husband learnt. I had to rethink my entire strategy of teaching him. And this made me realize, that people learn at different levels and in different ways, including medical students. Thus, the need to try and bring in different methods and strategies in teaching.

Overall there are a huge amount of life experiences that helped me to be what I am, and that is why I keep telling medical students that even in adversity, there's a lot to learn. The more the challenges thrown at you in life, the better or stronger a person you become.

For example, when I went for my MD examination in pathology, my father passed away in the middle of the exam. My siblings and husband were abroad at the time and there was no one to take the responsibility. I was very reluctant to continue with the exam, but many of my near and dear ones persuaded me to do so. I had to do the exam whilst my father's body was lying in our house. I tell this story to students because I know it's hard, but these are the life experiences that really mold your character and toughens you up. Life is never going to be easy just because you pass out as a doctor. It doesn't mean all your troubles are over. You have to often work under a lot of adverse circumstances.

That's so inspiring to hear madam. Madam, let's talk a bit about our journal. What are your thoughts on The Apprentice?

It's an absolutely wonderful idea. When Prof. Rohan Siriwardana spoke to me about it, I was very excited and impressed. I think it is a very good initiative on the part of all the students who put this forward. I think it will have a very good impact on the university and its' image because I believe this is one of the first of its' kind in this island, and that's the kind of thing we would like to have.

This will also definitely kindle the interest in research for students, which is very good; but apart from that I also think that there are other hidden soft skills that'll come into play in organizing this journal. For example, you are learning to interact, communicate and you're even interviewing me now. You're not worried or stressed out at this moment which is excellent. At your age, I may not have had that kind of confidence to interview a Dean. On the other hand, you are working as a team, so you're building up teamwork and enhancing other skills as well.

I firmly believe that for medical students or any student in the world, the important thing is having a balanced personality. It's not just your field or your specialty that matters. You have to have a very broad outlook on life. This initiative will definitely broaden everybody's outlook. In that aspect, I think you are doing a wonderful job.

Thank you madam, and that's about it. Just want to thank you again for giving us your time, we know you're very busy.

I'm never too busy for the students. I love spending time with students, and also in this kind of forum. It really pleases me to see you doing something out of the box (and not just studying) and enjoying it.

I love to see students doing things they enjoy because I believe that these are the best five years of a student's life. So it is important that you don't suddenly find that you have only been studying and you haven't had time to do other things - things you enjoy, it could be sewing, cooking, swimming, dancing, music, anything.

When I look back on my life, I feel I haven't wasted it because I've done almost everything that I wanted to do. It makes you feel like you've lived your life to the fullest extent.

All the very, very best with your journal. I think it's a brilliant idea and I will do whatever I can to help.

With that, we concluded what was a very pleasant and inspirational conversation, that would stay with us for a very long time to come.