

GROWING UP IN GURUTALAWA

The house we lived in at S.Thomas' Gurutalawa was situated in the middle of the Primary School block. The kindergarten classrooms were right in front of our house and I used to wander across to watch the children at their studies. As a result of this I started my schooling at the age of 04 years. At that time there were quite a number of girls in the kindergarten class and my first teacher was Miss Chintha Jayasinghe. The first concert I took part in was at this time and the play our class performed was "Rumpelstiltskin.". The first few years of my school life were very much the same as of any other child. All of us, boys and girls alike, studied and played together. In the evenings I used to play with the boys from 'Keble' dormitory, and used to play games like cricket and hockey. I was very interested in Scouting, as Thathi was in charge of the scout troop, and I used to watch the scouts during their weekly troop meetings. I wanted to be a scout but could not do so as I was a girl and there were no Girl Guides or Brownies. I however used to go along with Mrs.L Mendis every Wednesday when she had Cub pack meetings and take part in all their activities. Mrs.Mendis, who was in charge of the Cubs at that time, was extremely nice and did not mind me tagging along even when they went on hikes. I even had a log book of my own.

One of our class subjects was Kandyan Dancing, and Mr.Punchibanda was our dancing teacher. By the time I was in Grade 4 there were only a few girls left in my class. Mr.Punchibanda took a great deal of trouble to train us to dance and we had to take part for special occasions such as Prize Givings and also for concerts.

There were only 4 girls in my class when I was in Grade 5 and all of us were to leave at the end of the year. Thathi was also going to leave the Staff as I was to continue my schooling in Colombo, and Ammi wanted the family to be together as she did not want to put us into a boarding. When some members of the Board of Governors heard about this they asked the Headmaster to request permission from the Board for daughters of members of the staff to continue in school after Grade 5. This was done and permission was given by the Board of Governors. None of the other girls in my class were going up to Grade 6 with me and I ended up being the only girl in the class with about 30 boys.

At first I felt as if everything had changed. Our classes were in the upper school, my teachers were all new, and I did not have any of my friends with me. Even the boys seemed to have changed as well. None of the boys I had talked and played with for over five years would now talk to me. I was the only girl in the class and when none of the others would talk to me I found it rather difficult to get used to. Most days I would go through the entire school day without talking to anyone other than my teachers. This went on till about the Grade 8 class. Then they started teasing me and tried to make my life as difficult as possible. I used to go to class and find my desk and chair had disappeared. I certainly was not going all the way to the main hall to get replacements so I would take the teacher's desk and chair for myself, knowing very well that the boys would have to replace them before the teacher came to class. This was not all, I used to find leeches and small animals in my desk. Mud or ink on my chair, and so on. I took these as they came.

On some occasions their bullying went a little too far and then I was forced to tell somebody about it. I did not want to run to Thathi for everything as I wanted to manage on my own in the best way I could.

My teachers helped me a great deal in every way. Farther Goodchild in particular got the boys to respect women. I remember one day he scolded some of the boys for being rude to me. He said that they must remember that their mothers are women, and that they must respect all womankind in the same way they respected their mothers. So one day I passed this same set of boys while they were sitting outside the office and they all got up and said “Good Morning Madam”. Father Goodchild treated us all in the same way and made us mix. Although he did not cane me he used to threaten to throw the duster at me.

I could not take part in any sports after going up in to the upper school but I was in the school choir. Mr.Patrick Gunawardene was always there to get me involved in school activities and I think he was proud to have me in school. I can't say the same for everyone, as there were people who did not like me going up at S.Thomas' College, Gurutalawa. Once a boy who had joined in the higher classes came up to me and quite rudely asked me “Why are you studying in our school? Why don't you join a girls' school? I got really angry at this and told him that I had more right to call the College ‘My School’ as I had studied there for eleven years while he had only joined recently. I also told him that the school had been my home form the time I was born, and that I had been at College for a longer time than any of them.

Apart from Mr.Patrick Gunawardene and Rev.Goodchild there were so many teachers who helped me that I can't name them all but Mr.Sumanapala, Mr.Attapattu and Mrs.Sinnen are a few. I was also lucky in having good class and subject teachers.

I am very happy indeed that I was lucky enough to go to such a unique school. It was a great experience and studying at S.Thomas' College taught me how to get along with boys, and how not to give in when problems came along. I am certain this experience will help me when I go out into the world. I think co-education is good because it helps boys and girls to mix and respect each other and prepare them to face the future, how to behave and conduct oneself.

I am very happy to say that some of my best friends are boys, but my only regret is that I could not take part in any sports. Last but not least I want to say how grateful I am to the Board of Governors of the College for having given me such a rare and unique experience. I am not only very happy but very proud to be a “**THOMIAN**”.

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