

Daily News of 25th June 2003

Tribute to Warden Neville de Alwis: 'He did it his way' - By Rev. Marc Billimoria - Old Boy of STC & former Member of Staff.

June 15th 2003 was a sad day for many Thomians and the members of the family of Neville de Alwis. Warden Emeritus of the College, as the mortal remains of that great man were laid to rest after a ceremonial Thomian funeral attended by a throng of mourners from all walks of life. To many of us saying a last adieu and farewell to Warden Neville, who entered rest two weeks short of his 66th birthday, was akin to saying goodbye to a Father and a Mentor, and so it was apt that the funeral took place on Fathers' Day.

The moving ceremonial Thomian funeral, was a final tribute to a great Warden and a fine human being.

As I reflected on the whole day's proceedings, the services, the Bishop's moving eulogy, the newspaper tributes, the vast throng who flocked to the home and to the Chapel and filled the cemetery, as well as the many tributes that accompanied wreaths and posies, the one thing that struck me was that all this reflected just how much Warden Neville had meant to people and how much he had influenced people for good and been a blessing - how many lives he had touched.

All the buildings he had erected, all the infrastructural changes and innovations he had introduced all the modernization he had brought in while he was Warden fade into oblivion when compared to the number of lives that were transformed by this great man.

Though his life manifested the Godlike qualities of wisdom, love, compassion, humility, kindness and generosity, he was human and thus not perfect.

Yet even his imperfections are minuscule when compared with his greatness, his strength and his courage as a leader of men, family man and mentor. Perhaps this is

why a number of those who had opposed him in life found it necessary to pay their last respects to him in death.

Warden Neville's many achievements in all spheres during his fifteen and a half years at the helm of affairs at S. Thomas' College are a testimony to his greatness as a leader. To claim that his was the greatest of the four 'Golden Ages' of the College would be to do precisely what he never wanted done. In his farewell speech to the College on 30th June 1998 he said: *"Please don't compare me with past Wardens, simply enjoy and make use of what I am leaving for you and pass it on to those who come after you untarnished."*

Although he never claimed that the College was his life, those who knew him and worked with him knew just how much this was so. S. Thomas' College was a part of him. STC flowed in his veins! His day began and ended with STC. For him STC was his 'Pearl of Great price'.

In spite of the fact that he received very little official recognition after he retired he was not forgotten by most of those who had studied under him or served with him. The overwhelming evidence of this was seen at his funeral.

Enumeration of what he did for S. Thomas' College cannot be undertaken here, yet something needs to be said about the man behind the achievements. What attracted people to this simple, shy, unassuming man who bestrode the affairs of STC like a colossus for fifteen and a half years?

Warden Neville had a genial personality. The gruff, stiff exterior he often presented to us hid a warm heart, a sparkling wit and a sense of humour, which together with the fact that he cared deeply for people, made him a truly remarkable individual, with a great capacity for understanding their problems. Being a devoted family man, whose wife and children (and later his grandchildren) meant so much to him, he looked upon the Thomian community as one big family. His list of priorities was always *"First the boys, then the staff and then everything else..."* As the Lord Bishop said

in his eulogy "*Warden Neville was a people oriented person*". There are many that will bear testimony to this.

Warden Neville loved his students. In disciplining them he never thrashed them but loved them into submission. In his farewell speech he said thus: "*I wanted love to pervade the entire campus. I wanted them to feel that this was a second home for them. I wanted to see smiling faces . . . I never wanted boys to fear me, or fear coming to school. This was partly due to my belief that discipline should come from within and not to be enforced by the cane or any other form of corporal punishment. This does not mean that I neglected discipline in any way – the end was the same, the means were different.*" Some purists saw this philosophy as a weakness, but his stress on the boys discovering self-discipline from within, did not mean that he never reprimanded or punished boys for various offences. He certainly did. Yet it was for their own good and only for that moment and for that offence. He never harboured a grudge and the next day would treat the miscreant as though the incident had never taken place. When he forgave he 'wiped the slate clean'.

His philosophy influenced the manner in which he handled boys considered to be "wayward", "incorrigible" or "impossible." He did so like the father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. He took the initiative.

He had the flair for turning such boys around and guiding them on the correct course. Sometimes a brief chat was all it took for such boys to reform. No boy was too bad. His faith in them when all others had given up on them endeared him to such boys.

The tributes sent by many of these once wayward boys, now responsible citizens, are testimony that his method was effective. He truly exemplified the type of persons with whom God is pleased: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you God." (Micah 6:8)

This disposition also meant that he would always try to find ways of helping his boys to go through school with the minimum hassle. Having experienced the difficulties of attending STC due to financial constraints himself, he sought every opportunity to help those who found paying the fees a difficult task to stay in school with the minimum loss of dignity and self respect. The many students of the College between 1983 and 1998 who experienced this quality of Warden Neville will testify to this fact.

Secondly, it was not just the boys but the staff, of all sections and departments, especially the support staff, also benefited by his concern for people and their welfare. He did much to raise the dignity of staff. He was responsible for many of the enhanced benefits that the staff of all ranks received, such as increased salaries, pension rights, incentives, bonuses, insurance schemes, and many other benefits. One outstanding feature was his staunch advocacy of the right of children of the support (or minor) staff to be admitted as students. By doing so he proved that elitism had no place in the Thomian family.

Thirdly, Warden Neville had an abundance of the 'common touch'. Everyone felt at ease in his presence. He exuded dignity and commanded respect, except perhaps from those who he had displeased for one reason or another, more often than not the disgruntled who had not got their own way. His presence anywhere was one of a quiet and dignified authority. He was not averse to being witty and knew how to put at ease those he perceived to be nervous in his presence! Staff of all ranks, students, old boys and parents all saw this quality in him. He was thoroughly approachable. It would take him a long time to make his way from his bungalow to the office each morning as he would stop on the way to chat with staff and boys and each individual who passed him on that short stretch would receive a friendly nod or a hearty good morning, not to mention an occasional stern reprimand for the support staff member who had forgotten to sweep the area or water the plants or indeed a 'pulling of the leg' of a staff member or two. Many literally adored him and would have done anything for him. His loyalty to them was admirable as was theirs' to him.

Fourthly, he had a prodigious memory that was a tremendous asset to him and the envy of us all. He knew each boy in and out – their marks, their positions through school, their family background and their genealogies were all logged in his memory and were literally at his finger tips.

I recall the staff meeting at which he noticed that a certain student had fared rather poorly in Mathematics and recalled that the boy had done much better in an earlier class.

The teacher concerned had no recollection and went away to consult his records and it turned out to be so! One did not need a telephone directory when he was around, all you needed to do was to give him the name and back came the number in reply. Appearing before him for interviews was a daunting prospect as his memory provided him with a mental file on each individual and there was nothing that could be hidden from him.

This greatly assisted his administrative abilities and taught us the value of knowing the background of people. Facts and figures, about cricket for example, a game he loved with a passion although he had never played it himself, were at his fingertips. Kumar Boralessa and Pelham Juriansz describe him as a “Walking Wisden” He knew more about Thomian cricket than many who had played the game. He used to admit that for him cricket was King! Yet he gave as much patronage to other sports as well. He would have been a great asset to the committee writing the history of the Royal-Thomian Cricket match in time for the 125th game.

Fifthly, there was his acumen for always selecting the right man for any job. I recall the student who was known to have the makings of a fine actor and would have perfectly suited the lead role in a major production, but was reluctant to give it a go. Warden Neville convinced him to just try it once, and as expected the lad performed brilliantly, going on to be one of the finest actors ever produced by S. Thomas’ College. He recognized gifted people when others did not and he harnessed their talents for the greater good.

But to me his most remarkable and inspiring quality and what I shall most remember about him was his faith in God in the face of all obstacles. He was a Christian who had a childlike faith. It was this faith that sustained him – a faith grounded in the ‘High Church’ tradition of Anglicanism. He often recalled the words of Bishop Jabez Gnanapragasam who had once told him: “a Christian may be knocked down, but never knocked out! In his farewell speech to the school he said that this gave him a lot of strength. “This has stood me in good stead. I have never bowed to pressure, however powerful the individual may be”. “In the same speech he went on to read W. E. ‘Henley’s INVICTUS’, on the ‘unconquerable soul’. Verse two exemplifies Warden Neville’s experience.

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor

Cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings

of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed.

This was an amazing quality in the man. Other men would have turned and run from some of the problems that Warden Neville faced with courage, integrity and conviction.

Though he was hurt by some of the things that he had to face, he was by no means daunted by them. His personal motto was from Horace ‘*Aequam memento rebus in arduis servare mentem*’ – ‘Remember to keep a calm mind in difficult situations’.

He also taught us how to react to criticisms. His maxim was “Dogs may bark but the caravan still passes on.” With the bouquets for his achievements, he received his share of brickbats, yet nothing ever deterred him from the goals he had set for himself for the benefit of the College. This strength inspired those around him to stand firm, in spite of unpopularity, in spite of opposition. His strength was the impetus that made us stand with him. He inspired us and will continue to inspire us.

This great man did much not only as Warden, but also as a decent human being. As I said in my sermon on the 15th anniversary of his Institution and Installation, it was a combination of 'vision' and 'divine volition' that enabled him to do so. It was his farsightedness and his vision that spurred him on every step of the way. He taught us the value of always working with a vision and the equally important value of always thinking ten years ahead when taking certain momentous decisions. He fulfilled the vows he made at his Installation in January 1983, vows he renewed annually at a special service on the 19th of January.

The Man he was and the life he lived are like a stamp that must be imprinted for generations to come on the School he loved and served so well. What he has done must never be forgotten. In one of the prayers used at his funeral we prayed "that nothing good in this man's life will be lost, but will be of benefit to the world; that all that important to him will be respected by those who follow; and that everything in which he was great will continue to mean much to us now that he is dead." We need to say a loud 'Amen' to that.

Warden Neville de Alwis fought the good fight, finished his race and kept the faith. While offering our condolences to his wife and family who shared his joys and sorrows, it is now the turn of those who loved and respected him and sat at his feet, to emulate the noble example of the 'Man for All Reasons' who certainly did everything HIS WAY! As he always used to say, "History will be the best judge" of his remarkable life and times.

Ave atque vale magister magistrorum

Requiescat in pace