

## Life in the Fast Lane of Chemistry - How did the GIC Program Change My Life?

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Recently at a luncheon event at the University, a leading professor of Inorganic Chemistry asked me why I selected chemistry. My simple answer was "Colors." I have been fascinated with the colors of different chemical compounds since my childhood. I was never good at drawing pictures, so I became a Chemist.

Thanks to the Graduateship in Chemistry (GIC) program I evolved to be a focused chemist from a curious George who almost killed himself extracting mercury from a broken thermometer. As an individual who just missed out on University selection at the G.C.E. A/L, I didn't have a clear idea about the future when I started the GIC program. However, curiosity pushed me through the first few months, but later it was not that difficult to understand the wonders of nature through chemistry.

In our days, life in the GIC was not as easy as it is now. We had to study among hardships, limited laboratory facilities, space, etc. However, we learned from the excellent professors in Sri Lanka. No other university student gets to interact with the cream of the knowledge base in Sri Lanka as the GIC students. Our interaction with the professors was sometimes highly critical with heated arguments, but at the end of the day we learnt good Chemistry. There are some things I can still remember as it was, and are still useful no matter where they apply.

If I say I was the most benefitted person from the GIC program I am not exaggerating. My whole life changed there. I passed the GIC Part I and II being the first and the second in the batch with several awards, and I switched the positions and awards with my wife Mihiri, then my girlfriend. The experience as the Vice President and subsequently the President of the Students Association helped me interact with several key figures in the chemical industry as well as in research and academia. As a result we both were employed as technical assistants at the Industrial Technology Institute (ITI) for several years and teaching assistants at the GIC till we left Sri Lanka.

That paved the way for me to get the dream job of a chemist at that time: to work for Unilever Ceylon Ltd. Life didn't stop there, fortunately, and we decided to do higher studies, with the guidance and the push, rather I would say, from the professors at the Institute of Chemistry. We took off to the University of Louisiana at Monroe, USA (ULM) for our masters program, shortly after getting married,

thanks to Kamal and Chamika Wansapura who helped us to make our first move.

To be honest, with the knowledge we had from the GIC program, life in academia was easy and we had no difficulty in getting good grades and conducting research. Not to break the tradition, I became the Vice President and subsequently the President of the International Students Association at the University, and I won the most outstanding student award at the Department of Chemistry in 2002. After the MS in Inorganic Chemistry, we moved to the University of Delaware (UD) for our Ph.Ds. We helped several GIC students to come to the ULM, and I am happy that all of them are also working for their Ph.D's now.

Life in UD was not as easy as earlier; the competition and stakes are so high. It's not very easy to outsmart a hardworking and equally intelligent bunch of students. The training and experience we obtained in the program is immense, and it will be a huge pillar in my future. While I am in the Bioinorganic-Organometallic Chemistry Program, Mihiri decided to change from Inorganic Chemistry to Biochemistry since two Inorganic Chemists are too much for a family. She is also working on her Ph.D., in enzymology. Our pace slowed down as we welcomed our son two years back, but we can't complain about life as it is the best someone can have.

I have the privilege of meeting key figures who changed the world with their chemistry: the Nobel Laureates. Although I am too far from joining their elite club, the dream of achieving something outstanding has never gone from my mind. But I embrace the honor of meeting and interacting with such personalities, and indeed it's a dream come true.

My life has definitely changed from one who was trying to electrolyze a salt solution to isolate sodium hydroxide and chlorine gas using two carbon rods at grade seven to a final year Ph.D. student in Inorganic Chemistry who is trying to explain to the scientific community how the active site of Acetyl Co-Enzyme A works in Anaerobic bacteria. All the achievements, all the changes of my life began on that special day when I stepped into the New Science Building at S. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia. Life has come a long way and there is more than that to go; I can't imagine how the GIC program changed my life. I am planning to comeback to Sri Lanka one day, and serve I.Chem.C. and Sri Lanka with the knowledge and experience I gathered here.