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Turning a page

Celebrations, memories of the good times and lessons learnt – PREETI ZACHARIAH on the 68th College Day of Stella Maris

Like the enchanted ceiling at Hogwarts, the large open air theatre (OAT) at Stella Maris College, once opened directly into the heavens. Bound only by trees in whose branches nestle the 18 recorded species of birds that the college is home to (the college is now a birding area according to ebird.org), this space is where students of the college gather to celebrate together innumerable occasions, including College Day. Sixty-eight years have passed since the college was started to provide higher education for women, a date which coincides with India's Independence; some things have changed, many have not. The OAT belies its name now – a tin roof and whirring fans keep the oppressive heat at bay. And yes, there are a few empty chairs and missing faces among members of the staff, but the sight of young

women, tripping over gravity-defying saris held on by innumerable safety pins and good luck, giggling and chattering as they locate their friends and find places, hasn't changed. Nor indeed has the spirit of the institution.

"Whenever I enter Stella Maris, a sense of serenity and safety overwhelms me," says Latha Pandiarajan, Director, Ma Foi Strategic Consultants, a guest of honour at the institution's 68th College Day. The chief guest for the occasion, Dr. Nirmala Lakshman, Director of *The Hindu* group of publications and an alumnus of the institution, herself, says, "These years are the golden years, and I speak here from a deep personal experience. I recall the faces of many of my teachers, of lessons learnt both in the airy classrooms as well as in the grounds and corridors. In

the playing fields and in seminars, in debates and discussions, in performances and cultural activities, we learnt to expand our horizons, learnt what this country is made up of and how we as young people can contribute to making the world around us a better place."

According to Sister Jasinth Quadras, Ph.D., the college's Principal, its biggest strength is its "faculty that represents some of the best minds available in various disciplines; they have been the chief enablers of student achievement in various spheres within the institution and outside," she says.

From prestigious visitors to MoUs, from curriculum restructuring to new courses being offered, from prizes and publications to new grants, seminars, workshops, extension projects, conferences and performances, the

"I'm really going to miss college once I leave," says Maria Alexander at the prize distribution ceremony, a vital part of the College Day programme. It has been a challenging year for Maria, who is graduating in Computer Applications and has topped her class, for the third time running. "My father passed away suddenly last April. I was terribly shaken; he was one of my biggest support systems. But his death pushed me to work harder; I knew I had to be more responsible now," she says.

Although she always did well at school, it was only when she joined college that she began to top her class. She laughs, "I didn't like the other subjects as much but I am really into computer technology and programming," she laughs, adding that she has recently developed an App and is also working on the college website.

Maria's mother runs a placement agency for domestic help while Maria herself holds a part-time job. She admits that the owner of the organisation she works for and her institution have been very supportive. "I always knew I wanted to work, and in a way, it also kept my mind off things," she says. "I leave college by 4.30 and am at work till 9-9.30 every evening," she says, adding that she has taken a few months off from work to complete a project.

Besides work and studies, she also sings, plays the guitar and listens to music.

She enjoys learning new languages and reading in her spare time, "Which isn't much," she laughs.

On future plans, "I am going to do a Masters in computer application and hopefully get a good job," she says.



college has excelled this past year, she says. And it is not just the current staff and students who have done the college proud she adds, pointing out that Captain Divya Ajith Kumar, who led the Army's first all-women contingent at the Republic Day Parade in Delhi this year, is a former student of the college.

"Higher education institutions have the singular responsibility of shaping a nation's future through the young people who graduate from our colleges and universities. These are our future leaders, and hopefully, change agents who will bring about social justice," says Sr. Jasinth. Dr. Nirmala Lakshman, concurs, "As young people about to take on an

adult role in society, it is imperative to look around and be aware of things around us, outside the bounds of our everyday lives." "Remember always what you learnt here, the amazing grace that coloured your days here and never forget your alma mater. The world may be full of flaws and our society is currently putting out many challenges, but be bold as you venture out, be true to yourself and as many wise people have told us, follow your heart and follow your passion. Don't be afraid of failure, don't be afraid to fall and if you do, remember to stand up again quickly and to stand tall. Remember too that simply by being the best you can be, you do enough."



A DAY TO REMEMBER Dr. Nirmala Lakshman (third from left) and Sr. Jasinth Quadras (fourth from left) on the dais PHOTOS: V. GANESAN, M. VEDHAN



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