

My Chemistry Teacher Sam Alfred: A memoir

By: Dr. Jude M. Sooriyajeevan Ph.D.

Many scientists, physicians and engineers from St. Patrick's College, Jaffna were fortunate enough to study chemistry from Sam Master as Mr. Sam Alfred was known there at that time. He distinguished himself from other teachers in many ways, and one of them was his ability to teach without written reference notes. Not only his thorough understanding of the subject but also his ability to teach to students so that they do not need to ask questions for clarification was very impressive to me at that time.

Sam was a disciplinarian. His approach to discipline came from his personal culture of self-discipline. This was illustrated in a personal experience he narrated to us when we were his students. This personal experience was related to his struggle with addiction to smoking. During our times he had given up smoking, but struggled with cancer and eventually succumbed to that disease in August 1981. However, the decision to give up smoking and his persistence of staying as nonsmoker illustrated his culture of self-discipline.

In 1970s, Socialist SLFP government of Sri Lanka imposed restrictions on many items - including cigarettes. At that time, Sam said he was a chain-smoker. Because of government restrictions on quantities of cigarettes, prestigious Jaffna Corporative Society sold cigarettes to its members on quota. Buying cigarettes outside was even more difficult. Sam went to the Jaffna Corporative Society and found a long queue for cigarettes. He too joined the queue, and the queue was moving slowly. After spending more than half an hour he was thinking "I am, Sam Alfred, standing in this queue for half an hour, just for this cigarette. I am not doing anything useful, anything productive, but standing in this queue for this cigarette". Sam said that was the moment he decided that he wanted to end this. He got back to his home, and never smoked again. His determination and self-discipline were exemplary because giving up an addiction is one of the most difficult things to do in life. While many people in the world struggle to give up smoking even with medical treatment, Sam was able to do it with mere determination and self-discipline. Sam became an interesting model for self-discipline and personal determination for success, on that day and that moment when he told us this personal experience.

Not only students, even teachers of St. Patrick's college feared Sam's conviction to discipline. Noisy class rooms would become silent when Sam walked outside those classrooms. Man of few words, Sam expected all to follow his guidance unless directed otherwise. Once one of my classmates did not answer correctly to a question Sam asked, because he did not do the homework Sam gave to us. As a punishment Sam asked him to stay outside the classroom. The student complied. Sam continued to teach, but when he looked outside he felt uncomfortable seeing this student standing outside. Sam wanted to send him somewhere far away, so that he could continue to focus on teaching. Far away he saw a cow eating the grass within the school grounds. He directed the student to go and stand next to that cow. The student complied. Whenever the cow moved, the student also moved with cow because Sam instructed to stand next to the cow. Bell rang and the class was over. Sam did not instruct the student to return to the classroom – perhaps some other issues occupied his mind. The student returned to the classroom after Sam left. The next day just before Sam's class the student left the classroom and looked for the cow. He found the cow, and he went and stood next to the cow. Sam came to the class and began his lecture. Then incidentally he noticed the cow and the student, and he realized that the student was following his previous day instructions. He could not stop laughing, but he was kind enough to go outside the classroom and tell the student to return to the class. We studied perfectly because of Sam. Sam taught us to obey the rules and regulations, and reap the benefit of it.

In his class the attendance was taken in old fashion: Sam would open up the attendance register, say "attendance" and the first student in the attendance register would stand up and say his name followed by the word "present". The rest of us follow it in sequence. Finally the class Monitor would stand up and say the total count in the class. If any student was absent immediately before you in the sequence, it was your responsibility to know this and stand up for that student and say his name followed by the word "absent". What would have happened if more than one student was absent in the sequence before you? That is where your ability to foresee the future and being prepared for all kinds of scenarios kicks in. Some of us learned the skills and excelled in life, thanks to Sam. Others too learned the skills, but in the hard way. One day, a new student in our class could not remember names in the

sequence before him, and unfortunately more than 2 students in that sequence were absent. This was time for his punishment. Sam called the student to come forward and remove all shelves in a cupboard. After removing all the shelves, Sam asked the student to get in there. Student bent himself so that he could fit in. Then Sam called the Monitor to come forward and close the cupboard doors. Monitor closed the doors, but they could not be completely closed. Later, at the end of the attendance, it was the turn of the Monitor to count the number of students. Alas, he made a mistake: it was a wrong count! Sam asked the Monitor to open the cupboard, and asked the student to come out. This was the time for punishment to the Monitor. Sam asked the Monitor to get in the cupboard, and asked the student to close the doors. Then he began to teach chemistry.

Sam neither favored particular students nor provided privileges to those who held positions in the school. His punishments were mostly public humiliation and memorable. They in fact taught us the public disgrace one would face if he violates laws, rules and regulation in later life. Those of us fortunate enough to settle down in countries ruled by law know the benefits of the lessons we learned from Sam Master, and we miss him forever.

Writer's profile:

Jude Mariampillai Sooriyajeevan studied at St. Patrick's College Jaffna from primary and he was in 79OL/82AL batch. He entered University of Jaffna from SPC for his B.Sc degree and later obtained his Ph.D in Medical Physics from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Jude Soori has extensive working experience in the field of Medical Imaging software development in North America. He enjoys travelling and also writes articles and analysis on socio-political issues specifically related to Sri Lanka in various print and electronic media.
