

## An onlooker speaks...

### WITH SMILES ON THEIR LIPS AND LIGHT IN THEIR EYES...

An interested onlooker at the 13th Marian Goonetilleke Scholarships Awards Ceremony claims–

“When children know that others care, they smile, they sing, they laugh and they thrive. So let them know they are cared for and we have a world of happy, laughing children and then... a happy and laughing world.”

The room was a buzz with the laughter and chatter of small children and the happy murmurs of others present. Officers, airmen and air women attended their relevant duties diligently, hoping to make the special day a memorable one for all. Excitement gave a luster to the faces of children lined up to receive their scholarship awards and the pleasant anticipation in the room was almost tangible.

The dignitaries arrived and customary procedures concluded. The gathering stood up with a heavy heart, yet with pride, to remember and honour those who sacrificed their precious lives to let our country and her people be, forever free. Singing the National Anthem at my loudest, I surreptitiously looked around the packed room and was delighted to see everybody singing out loud with pride...as a Nation now free to breathe and live.

Then it was time to sit back and watch what unfolded on the screen...the beautiful foot steps that Sri Lanka Air Force Seva Vanitha Unit (SLAF SVU) left on the lives of men, women and children who are and will always be part of SLAF. SVU aims at supporting all Sri Lankan women with equality and focus on transcending all barriers. It strives to empower women to be part of the growth of the Nation and encourage them to accept responsibility as a component of that growth's engine. Working nationally, SVU has kicked off many novel projects under the guidance of its present Chairperson Mrs. Nelun Goonetilleke. These projects are designed to improve the quality of life of SLAF servicemen and their families in particular and the society in general.

Afterwards it was the highlights of the evening. As always children stole the show. They walked up the steps to the stage to receive their award, when their names were called out. If butterflies fluttered in their stomachs as they walked up to the smiling first lady, the second lady, the Commander of SLAF or the Chairperson of SVU, the flutters did not show. It was with admiration that I watched the children walk up and climb down with poise. I decided then and there that it was the knowledge that someone cared which gave them this confidence.

It was enthralling to watch that sweet struggle to peep beneath the wrappers and covers, once the children got back to their seats. Eager little hands tore at the carefully pasted and daintily wrapped covers. Despite parental admonishes, they reached inside the now torn covers; animated eyes looked curious and held so much hope. Triumphant, the busy fingers pulled out the treasured gift, the scholarship, and a smile bloomed on innocent lips. In glee they turned to their parents and held up the 'treasures,' the parents hurriedly pushed them inside the covers, scolding and trying to look strict-yet love and happiness poured out from their eyes.



I am a social worker, a writer, an activist, a dreamer, an optimist, a pragmatist, and a peace lover – all blended into one. But more importantly I am a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister and a Sri Lankan and I have worked with many Women's Organizations before. I have been part of their beautiful activities and events as an organizer, a host, a funder, a speaker, a participant, a friend or as in this case a by standing onlooker. But I have rarely seen or felt what I saw and felt on that day. The warmth exuded by those truly involved with the activity was enriching, while the happiness and practical optimism that were produced by the activities were highly commendable.

The efforts of an organization become doubly worthy when their actions are focused and planned, developed and implemented as a response to ground realities. A woman is not a mere victim of discrimination, violence and harassment - not anymore; she is also a survivor, a provider and a care giver. Today, women's role as significant contributors to the forward march of mankind has gained worldwide recognition. It is rewarding as a Sri Lankan woman to see and feel organizations like SLAF SVU striving to harness that recognition to make lives better in Sri Lanka. (NG)

