

In Memoriam

Harshini V. de Silva
1963–2000

DR. HARSHINI V. DE SILVA was killed on October 10, 2000, in a tragic automobile accident in Charlotte, NC. Harshini was an outstanding scientist, a devoted mother, and a loving wife. She is survived by her husband Dr. Robert Wilhelm and two beautiful daughters, Menaka and Amelia.

Harshini was best known for her research in lipid metabolism, particularly the role of lipoproteins in fetal development. Recently, she expanded her research program to include an initiative in the area of liver disease. Her research was supported by major grants from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, and the results of her work were widely published in peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of Lipid Research*. In addition, Harshini was the author/inventor of several patents in the field of transgenic mouse research. Harshini was a fellow of the American Heart Association Council on Arteriosclerosis and was a 1999 finalist for the Irvine H. Page Young Investigator Award in Arteriosclerosis Research.

Harshini was born on February 3, 1963, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and immigrated to Wichita, KS, in 1977. Following in the footsteps of her parents, Drs. Dharma and Deema de Silva, Harshini became a university professor. She was a tenured associate professor of biology at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (UNCC) at the time of her death.

Harshini obtained her Master of Science degree in microbiology in 1985 with Dr. Delbert Shankel at the University of Kansas and her PhD degree in pharmacology in 1989 in my research group at the University of Cincinnati, OH. At Cincinnati, Harshini was the consummate graduate student. She approached her courses and her thesis research with genuine, unabashed excitement. She was highly respected by faculty, staff, and students—for her grades, of course, but also for her role as a leader in the laboratory and in the graduate program. She shared her expertise and time as, for example, an active participant in the student seminar series, an effective student recruiter, and a mentor to incoming students. Her teaching experience (including gross anatomy!) and her understanding of the dynamics of educational institutions provided a unique and valuable perspective to the student community. Although Harshini was intense and serious in the lab, she loved festivity. Sunshine followed her every step. She was able to have fun in graduate school because her stable personality and unflappable nature made her ideally suited to withstanding the pressures and conflicts that students encounter during the lengthy training period. Her enthusiasm never wavered. From Dr. John Wet-

terau, who was a postdoctoral fellow at Cincinnati when he first met Harshini: “I will remember her most for the passion and joy she brought to her work.”

Harshini continued her scientific career as a postdoctoral fellow at the Gladstone Institute of Cardiovascular Disease in San Francisco, CA. From Dr. John Taylor, who mentored Harshini during her postdoctoral years: “Whenever I thought of Harshini over the years, I could see the wide smile, the bright and lively eyes, and her full-of-life personality. She had a vitality and positive enthusiasm that signaled her presence wherever she went.”

When I remember Harshini, I immediately recall her scientific courage and her strong commitment to education. Rather than abandon her original dissertation project, as advised by her co-workers in my lab and her dissertation committee, she was convinced that the 78-kDa protein we (and others) had believed to be the cholesteryl ester transfer protein merited her full attention. Her insightful decision, backed by her talented hands and long hours at the lab bench, opened an avenue of research in my lab that proved to be our most significant. That protein that Harshini identified and cloned, now designated apolipoprotein J (alias clusterin), has proven to be a critical participant during repair of tissue injury, providing a long-sought link between lipid metabolism and inflammation. At UNCC Harshini welcomed high school and undergraduate students into her laboratory to show them first-hand the excitement of basic science research, and she worked tirelessly to help develop there a strong PhD graduate program in biology.

Harshini had it all as a scientist: clarity of vision, intellectual dexterity, personal dedication and drive, distaste for dogma, and an exceptional talent for collegial and productive collaboration. Harshini’s premature death is a great loss to her family, the scientific community, and the next generation of scientists she would have mentored and inspired.

In honor of Harshini, the UNCC has established the Graduate Mentor Award to be presented annually to a faculty member who has demonstrated superior commitment to student education. Contributions designated for this award may be sent to the following address: Development Office, University of North Carolina, Charlotte Foundation, 1021 Colvard, 9201, University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28233.

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