

**Toast by Professor Renuka Visvanathan
at Old Collegians' Association drinks to mark the 40th anniversary of coeducation
St Mark's College, Adelaide
Friday 28 October 2022**

Thank you Riley, the President of the St Mark's Old Collegian Association, for inviting me to make this toast today, on this occasion where we are all here to celebrate 40 years of co-education at St Mark's College.

St Mark's to many of us was our home away from home. A place where our school years ended and our journey into adulthood with optimism began.

It is a place where we adapted and grew, forging lasting friendships. To most of us, St Mark's remains an important memory, an experience that either consciously or sub-consciously has contributed to our future.

For me, Master Ashwin, Wally, the Dean and Profs Nicholas and Usher were my go to people. The people who were there, for advice and support, as I became accustomed to a new way of living away from my country of birth, Malaysia.

I am sure, for many at St Mark's also, it was for them a learning experience of how to accommodate someone from a different way of life, like me. It was a place for multiculturalism to grow and flourish.

My first recollections of St Mark's were extremely positive. My brother who is here today, liked it so much, he stayed on at St Mark's even when he worked at the Royal Adelaide Hospital in his internship year, leaving after seven years as I arrived for my six year stint.

For me, St Mark's was a luxurious place to board. I had always dreamt of living and studying at Oxford or Cambridge, a dream that has never been fulfilled. However, living at St Mark's College, for me has turned out to be even better.

For starters, the weather in Australia is a million times better. Never would I have survived the winters in England. I am after all someone who opted to go to the North Pole in summer to experience the 24 hour sun rather than adventuring in winter to view the spectacular northern lights.

Arriving at St Mark's, I imagined that I would have to share a room with someone else, very much like what they show us on American sitcoms. How excited was I, to be allocated a spacious room, on the ground floor of the Memorial building with a study desk and a wardrobe, all to myself.

The phone was directly outside my room, which suited me just fine. Missing home, my poor parents ended up with a huge telephone bill, talking to me for hours and on most days. I am ever grateful to my parents for sending me to St Mark's and for being there for me at the end of the telephone whenever I needed them.

On arrival at St Mark's, I was regularly exposed to sausages, meat pie and spaghetti Bolognese in the dining hall. For me, these were treats that I enjoyed and really looked forward to. It was some six months later that I realised that these meals contained beef. As a Hindu, I had to spend some time coming to terms that I had somehow accidentally sinned. After all Nandi, is the bull vehicle of the Hindu supreme lord Shiva and Krishna loved cows. Negotiations with the kitchen ensued to ensure that I had my rice and an alternative meat to beef.

A golfer, I was delighted with the lovely view of the green lawns out of my room windows and beyond the hedges. How lovely it was, to live so close to the North Adelaide golf course.

Walking to the University of Adelaide through the parklands and to the city over the Adelaide bridge were favourites for me, which I did almost every day, even when it rained. The ability to walk to the Aquatic centre for a swim and to use the gym were added bonuses.

It was at St Mark's that I was introduced to cricket. Very often, I was asked to stand behind someone else on the field. Reason being is that I was more likely to wait for the ball to arrive to me rather than attempt to catch it or even run after the ball. A handicap to any team but nevertheless, I was included whenever I wanted to join in.

Always more the nerd than the athlete, the computer room was a joy for me, my favourite space, especially with all those mac computers, a treat for me. Bonus was the air conditioner in the room, especially during the summer periods.

The student body was always friendly and very kind. I can remember walking past the lawns to the computer room. Students would call out to me to join them on the lawns and in the sun. Now, being Asian, we stay out of the sun and we have a preference for air-conditioned spaces where it is cool. So, I must have seemed quite anti-social to many, when declining their enthusiastic offers.

Since we are talking about co-education, I must admit that I did experience culture shock on my arrival at St Mark's.

I had studied in a country where culturally, girls would not change in or out of their clothes, in front of each other.

It was a shock to be faced with a situation on arrival where we had to use the same toilet and shower facilities as men. Sure, there were doors but it was still awkward to have men in the same space whilst we were using the toilet or showers.

I pity the gentleman who shared our corridor. Demonstrating superb leadership and negotiation skills, we women commandeered the only individual toilet and converted it to an exclusive female toilet. Rules were established that everyone of the male gender was locked out of the toilet/shower area when females were in the shower. Sure, the times when this would occur were negotiated. I am sure there was disgruntlement on the floor, but we women got our way. There was never a harsh word uttered to us!

Although my recollections are somewhat hazy, I am sure that I was allocated to a room with my own ensuite toilet and shower the next year in the Newland building, which was a relief for me. I never had to share the shower or toilet again in my remaining years at St Mark's.

I am not sure if anyone here remembers this or knows of this, but I did have a 'no boys policy' in my room when I first arrived. It must have been a funny sight to see men standing outside my door to talk to me. Some years later, a male friend who was the boyfriend of one of my good friends asked me why I had allowed him into my room? I was puzzled by this very strange question. He then reminded me that it was general knowledge around the college that I had a 'no boys policy'. So, clearly, by then, I had forgotten the rules that I had made myself.

I would now like to end here by sharing with everyone, a poem written by my 14 year old niece Priyanka Thavarajah from Seymour College, written specifically for this occasion where we are gathered to celebrate 40 years of co-education at St Mark's college.

Girls
Boys
Opposite Sex
But working together is what we do best
Two halves of a whole
Each holding a role
In a world run by us

Together
Together we learn, we strive, we conquer
Making mistakes, encouraging each other
Girls and boys
Friends with one another
In a world run by us

This world of the future
Can only be nurtured
By the workplaces and colleges
And the people that make the rules
If they value equality
Giving an equal education
To the girls and boys that will run our nation

Only then can we hope
To unite as one
Working together under the sun
Girls and boys
Men and women
In a world run by us

So, everyone, let us raise our glasses to salute St Mark's exemplar 40 years of co-education and to wish St Mark's many more years of excellence in ensuring equality of the student experience for men and women, for our future.