

Teachers Day celebration 05.09.21

From medicine to teaching

J Vijayalakshmy is a teacher to children with multiple disabilities for the last three decades

LIFFY THOMAS

With the diagnosis of her son's hearing loss, J Vijayalakshmy, a medical doctor, turned into a rehabilitation worker. In the 1990s, the family even relocated from Kerala to Chennai in search of a school for the boy.

She began her journey as teacher at Clarke School for the Deaf in RK Salai.

Now working with National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities (NIEPMD), Vijayalakshmy has found her calling in teaching special children.

While her son would be in the class, she would wait right outside the classroom.

"Founder of Clarke School for the Deaf, Dr Leelavathy Patrick asked me to help them in creating a medical record of all the students at the school as she knew my background," says Vijayalakshmy, a paediatrician.

There began the grooming, which has included a slew of responsibilities and being sent to conferences and even stints beyond the Indian shores.

"In 1995, the first deaf-blind student joined the school and I was asked to work with the child," says Vijayalakshmy. In 1997, the school management sent her on a sponsored trip to Netherland to help her with a deeper understanding of deaf-blindness, early identification of multiple disabilities and multi-disciplinary aspects in holistic schooling. This was followed by a six-month stint in London.

After 14 years at Clarke's, she moved to NIEPMD as lecturer in Medical Sciences, focussing on early identification, diagnosis,



programme planning and parent training. Those were the early years of NIEPMD and the team had the task of creating awareness about the centre.

"We adapted a number of teaching learning material like B Active Box, Resonance Box for the Institute to our requirements. I was one of the first teachers in the deaf-blind unit (cerebral palsy was the only other unit it housed then)," says Vijayalakshmy, a resident of Kelambakkam.

Vijayalakshmy has spearheaded various programmes at NIEPMD, which includes being a course coordinator for a diploma in special education and deafblindness, a post graduate programme in early intervention – enrolling students for these courses was a challenge as awareness about multiple disabilities was low those days. Besides, she has also trained professionals of district Early Intervention Centres of Tamil Nadu.

The teacher, who has won a few awards for her work in the area, is currently working on a hand book on multiple disabilities, with focus on autism and its causes.



Teacher

PRINCE FREDERICK

There is an echo of John Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* in Ganapathy Iyer Girls High School's pandemic experience.

In Steinbeck's novel, when thrust into a war, a small nation of unarmed, peace-loving people flounder their way to resistance, slowly becoming firm-footed in their mission. Signalling the early stage of the shift from "peace-loving" to "combative", the pickaxe turns into a weapon of destruction.

In the Gopalapuram school, when thrust into online classes, a clutch of digital-immigrant, text-book-loving teachers bumble their way to digital literacy, slowly becoming comfortable in front of the screen. The first sign of the shift from "bewilderment" to "poise" is a fridge glass tray that morphs into a makeshift stand cum see-through screen.

Before going into the details of the innovation, here is what led up to it.

On June 15, 2020, the headmistress of the school, Saradhamani Subramanian had summoned the teachers for an urgent meeting. No sooner had she broached the topic than she found herself in one lonely corner of the room. The rest of the teachers had broken into two groups, neither of them warming up to Saradhamani's suggestion.

The headmistress had asked them to video-record all the lessons in WhatsApp to be shared

An early intervention centre at NIEPMD, and (above) J. Vijayalakshmy.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Hindu Down Town 05.09.21