

Presenting the pages in her book

By NABEELA HUSSAIN

Dedicated to her work and always on the look out for a challenge in her line of work, Premila Gamage strives for the best that she can achieve in her personal life as well as her career.

A librarian for more than 20 years, Premila says that though her library may be small when it comes to the number of books, the knowledge that can be gained is immense. "We work with very demanding researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and that is a challenge that I cannot resist," she said with a laugh.

The only Sri Lankan to hold three prominent posts at the International Federation of Library Association and Information (IFLA), Premila is dedicated to perfecting the art of library sciences and introducing the love of information and knowledge to Sri Lanka as well as the world.

A member of the Asia and Oceania group of the IFLA in 2005, Premila climbed the ranks to become its secretary in 2005 and finally the chairperson of the group in 2007. After which Premila was elected to represent three major regions of the world at IFLA. "I left after that as I had to allocate more time for my studies, but I am now a trainer and I regularly travel to Lebanon to train librarians there," she said.

Growing up and schooling at Visakha Vidyalaya, Premila says that she was a normal child who started to work as an assistant accountant after she left school. "I saw an advertisement one day on the paper about a diploma in library sciences and since I was curious and loved books I applied for it," she said.

Premila however says that she wasn't sure about continuing the three year course as it was different and nothing like she expected. "But fortunately for me I got the results for my first year and as I had gotten very good results I changed my mind," she said.

Ever since then she has been hooked to a library, rarely parting with it. Except for her studies Premila has always been working at a library or helping others with libraries. Working first at the Buddhist and Pali University Library from 1985-1990, Premila then joined the Library at the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology at the Kelaniya University. She however says that her longest stay in a library was at the IPS

where she has worked for the past 14 years as the Chief Librarian. "With extremely demanding researchers at the Institute, there are so many challenges to be faced," she said with a laugh.

Premila says that she specializes in IT and Libraries, where she combines the two. With the introduction of the net based library, Premila says that she has very little books left. "When I first came to IPS there were many difficulties but I have always provided the best with the limited resources at my disposal," she said.

She says that the biggest difficulty was to make people believe that the library could provide them with the necessary information they sought. "I had to convince them to have faith in the library and that was hard at the beginning as the people here had already had their personal libraries when I came here," she said.

Premila however, says that she had convinced the researchers who now received all the necessary information at their finger tips. "The only time anyone comes here is when they have to physically borrow anything," she explained. According to Premila the Institute mails everything that they need so that the researchers can read through them when they switch on their computers in the morning.

With her Masters in Library Science Premila is now reading for her PHD at the Leeds Metropolitan University in London for where she was awarded a scholarship. "I saw it in the newsletter of the British Library Association and applied for it, they short listed me and then had a telephone interview after which they told me that I was selected to receive one of the 100 scholarships they were giving" she said.

"My bosses at IPS gave me three years' leave and I am grateful that they allowed me to continue with my studies," Premila explained.

With just two chapters of her thesis to finish Premila says that she wants people to understand the real job as a librarian and highlight that this is not just a job but there is much more that has to be done behind the scenes.

"I would however like to thank two people in my professional life that have been a pillar of strength and that is Prof. Senaka Bandaranayke and Dr. Saman Kelegama as well as N. U. Yapa, a prominent librarian who introduced library IT to Sri Lanka," she said.

Pics by Samantha Perera

