

Breaking through

A stranger in a new land, to excel - with a little help

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Amudini Ponndurai still fights the urge to stand up when Mr. Howard asks her a question.

It seems so disrespectful, this Canadian custom of remaining in your chair to give a response. After all, Mr. Howard's a teacher.

In Sri Lanka, a student would be hauled to the principal's office by the ear if she didn't stand. She'd get a rap across an open hand, too, if she failed to snap to her feet when a teacher entered the room - or if she resumed her seat too quickly.

At Jarvis those first few months, Amudini couldn't understand why her classmates kept tittering and nudging each other like fools every time she took to her feet.

She's a year older now - and a year wiser in the ways of Jarvis Collegiate Institute - but they don't make any more sense.

Why, for instance, do 1,500 students have to storm out of classrooms after 70 minutes and go to other classrooms? Wouldn't it be easier if the teachers moved from one set of stationary students to the next? And why do you get graded for doing homework? Don't you have to do homework to succeed on an exam? And some of these students. Don't they understand what's at stake here?

Amudini knows exactly what's at stake: an education; a chance to succeed. Her parents have suffered mightily to give her this opportunity and she won't fritter it away.

Velupillai Ponndurai was a successful Tamil business-

man in his native Sri Lanka, a regional manager for a salt production and distribution company. His wife, a qualified teacher, assisted him in the office.

Together they raised a boy and two girls. Kumandasam, Kumidini and Amudini were all exceptional students; they were kind and respectful children.

In their village, life was friendly, ordered and happy. The Ponndurais would gather often with friends to eat rice and curried fish and eggplant and drink lemonade from the fruit of a tree in the backyard.

If only the war would go away. Since it began in 1983, the civil war had made life increasingly treacherous. Fighting had been marked by one massacre after another, each in retaliation for an earlier outrage.

Eventually, the war would come too close to home. When Tamil rebels threatened to forcibly enlist Kumandasam in 1987, Mr. Ponndurai sold his home and property to get his son out of the country; he moved the rest of his family south to the city of Puttalam.

But the civil war - and the country's intractable racial tensions - made their futures uncertain. It was an easy decision, then, to emigrate when the opportunity arose. Kumandasam had married a woman in Germany and moved to Canada; he would sponsor the family.

Amudini arrived in Toronto with her father, mother and sister on Aug. 31, 1992. She was in Jarvis Collegiate one week later, tongue-tied and afraid.

Yet, whatever her difficulty in school these two years, Amudini knows it



BERNARD WEIL / TORONTO STAR

CLASS STRUGGLE: Amudini Ponndurai, who fled war in Sri Lanka in 1992, chats with classmate.

pales in comparison to the suffering of her parents. They both remain unemployed. They hate the weather and find it difficult to make friends with people not from their village.

SCHOOL COLORS

PART FOUR

Jarvis Collegiate, a school coping with budget cutbacks and education reform, opened its doors to The Star's Andrew Duffy last term for 4½ months.



Andrew Duffy

They're uncomfortable in their St. Jamestown apartment. They don't like the food.

Now, in the library between classes, Amudini pens a careful message that will accompany her photo in the Jarvis yearbook, the *Magnet*:

"Dear friend, don't give up any of your dreams.

Life is sometimes hard, but not always. Everybody has the right to dream and

the power to get it.

If you can wish for the blue sky and the blowing wind,

Future will bring them to you!

Fill your heart with hopes!

Tomorrow will be better.

If not, the day after tomorrow is still there!!"