

A nation-builder par excellence

Niloufer Manzur, the founding principal of Sunbeams School, died from Covid-19 on May 26, 2020. As the news of her death spread, there has been an outpouring of love and condolences from her students, friends, and well-wishers. Below is a collection of three tributes sent in by our readers, all former students of Niloufer Manzur.

My teacher, mentor and role model

RUBANA AHMED

My heart is filled with sorrow as I bow in respect to you, my teacher, my mentor and my role model. And then your words of wisdom and courage lift my spirit as I can hear you say, “When you stumble and struggle in despair, look around you and find the person who needs help, extend your hand and console his or her pain and soon you will find your solace...” You taught us to be grateful for all our blessings and reminded us that no matter what we achieve in life, we must at first be a good human being, kind-hearted, humble, thoughtful and sincere. Like so many of us, I have been privileged to be a part of the Sunbeams family. This is not just an institution, it is like a tree that is evergreen and lives on—over the seasons and beyond time.

Mrs. Manzur, as I first learned to address her, was my teacher at Geeran’s Tutorial. My mother’s ardent desire to ensure the necessary skills for her children brought about my changing of schools post half-yearly exams, sometime in August 1973.

I started the journey as one of the first students of Sunbeams. Our classes began in the living room and the veranda of her home at Indira Road, and history has written itself since that January day in 1974. To this day when I hear someone say they are students of Sunbeams, I glow in pride and joy to know I have met a schoolmate; they are part of my family.

My principal with a principle, Mrs. Manzur empowered each one of us, during the first few days of our initiation, to choose a name for our own school. The teachers and the students were all quite young, but that did not matter. I still recall the day: there were stacks of our English textbooks... Radiant Way- First Step, Second Step, Third Step... and then there was one named Sunbeams! And we had a name for our school! The cover of the book was red and our first benches that were built in front of us were also of the same bright red colour. From the first day, we also met the first “computer” of our school, Nurul Islam Bhui. Each morning he ushered us in



Niloufer Manzur, who died on May 26, 2020.

with a smile, knew each one of our names, whom we came to school with and their identities, relentlessly making sure to never let us leave school with anyone unless he knew them. Her dream and her team emerged with ease because she was one who emanated commitment, responsibility and affection—a unique combination of attributes that she instilled in all of us.

I learned at an early age that all good intentions are always well rewarded. Mrs. Manzur opened her home to us with generosity so we could learn, and she opened our minds’ doors with her aspiration to shower children with the gift of knowledge. Humility and commitment were her strength.

She was steadfast in her commitment to enlighten each mind and give us, the new generation, the opportunities she had received. We were a family, one that evolved from a handful of students to an institution that has since generated many achievers over the last four decades. I have had the honour to be a student, a teacher’s assistant and later a teacher at Sunbeams. I have learnt at each step from her.

Mrs. Manzur has always been my role model, my mentor, the reason why I became a teacher. She was a monarch on her own; she attained love and respect from all of us—students, teachers, peers, and anyone who had the honour of knowing her. She was

a pioneer in offering a platform for private education so students could be exposed to new and emerging ideas. In her desire to enlighten us, she introduced us to many acclaimed instructors such as Professor Razia Amin who taught us literature—the reason why each of Shakespeare’s tragedies is embedded in my mind to this day—and Mrs. Alam who taught us history and geography. There were so many more. My principal wanted all of her students to learn from the best. We were her children, her family, and she worked tirelessly to ensure we always had the best facilities. At a time when there was no Internet, she introduced us to the British Council Library membership allowing us

access to a plethora of sources of knowledge. We could explore all our interests and learn as we pleased.

When early childhood education was not the most emphasised phenomenon, she knew it was the most necessary step in shaping the minds of children who would grow up to be the leaders and nation builders of tomorrow. Her vision was impeccable; she knew the importance of educating the young mind during their foundation years. My most important lesson when I joined as a teacher was her words during our weekly teachers’ meeting: “Remember, once you are a teacher, you are always a teacher, whether you are in class or outside. Carry yourself in a way that you may earn the respect of your colleagues and your students at all times.” To this day, I remember these words with gratitude.

Over the years, Mrs. Manzur had become my Niloufer Aunty, the love and affection evolved, and she was overjoyed when I went to inform her of my PhD. Her smile has always been my inspiration, her confidence my encouragement. She would always embrace me with love and affection and ask about my parents, my sister, and my aunt who was a teacher during the initial years. Her grace and magnanimity instilled a value of morality and respectfulness that has shaped my mind-set. As I stand in front of my students today, I reminisce her thoughts and tell my students, I teach so you can learn and achieve greater milestones than I could ever attain. This is what my role model, my mentor, my teacher taught me. I know that my schoolmates, like me, are also immersed in sorrow as we wipe our tears and remember each of our unique experiences with her and the honour of having her as a teacher and so much more... we are better today because she showed us the way.

Mrs. Manzur, you are like the sun in our solar system; as we revolve around you, you hold us with your strength. And like the sun, you keep us united. May we continue to uphold your ideals and values of compassion and caring.

Rubana Ahmed, PhD, is an assistant professor at Brac University.

The Immortal Mrs. Manzur

NABILA MURSHED

Dear Mrs. Manzur, Sunbeams will not be Sunbeams without you. The corridors will miss your steady footsteps. The students and faculty will miss your confident leadership. You gave your students a solid foundation in their life. You helped them build character. You opened up new horizons for them.

You set clear expectations. You wanted your children at Sunbeams to be resilient, sensible, self-assured, helpful, grateful, and above all, a community of givers. You defined this never-giving-up trait to be the Bengali spirit. You had decided that the medium of instruction would be Bangla and English for some subjects. You were also our emotional shelter, our loving friend, philosopher and guide.

You personified the values of kindness, simplicity, curiosity and leadership. You did not have an ounce of excess in you. You shied away from interviews. But you made an exception when you made a brief appearance in Mr. Manzur Elahi’s NTV interview. You said that you admired a strong sense of responsibility, a passion for justice, intelligence, friendship and patience.

Today we are numb and heartbroken to have lost you. Kaiser Tamiz Amin, from your first batch of students, aptly reflects

that we are mourning your quietus and celebrating your immense contribution as an educationist par excellence. Sabera Zareen, also from your first batch of students, says, “I have no words right now. She has been such a source of strength for me personally. I am left truly bereft.” Her 20-year-old son Areeb, a second-generation Beamer, feels the world will be a poorer place without you.

Mrs. Manzur, I think you would have been very pleased to learn that one of your students from the seventies, Tazeen Ishart Zaman, has carried her corrected grammar script (with your comments) all the way to Jeddah as a memento, which she has been fondly preserving to this date. This is a testimony to the kind of impact, respect and influence you exerted upon your students.

I think you had the knack to get brilliant teachers on board. Mrs. Amin, Mrs. Khan, Mrs. Taher, Mrs. Huda, Mrs. Omar, Mrs. Rahman, Mrs. Sattar taught their designated subjects so well. They challenged us to comprehend, imagine and create.

As for me, you are coming into my mind’s eye in your pretty floral silk saris. Right now, my mind is going back to Road 22, Dhanmandi R.A., where you moved Sunbeams from your home into a bigger space. You rented Mr. Bazle Kader’s first floor flat with a yard. In that yard was a seesaw, possibly a swing, a bench and

enough room to run around. There was a driveway where we would stroll and chat. You added outdoor play, the opportunity to foster lifelong friendship, to serious learning. In my mind, I still see you entering the compound with Nasim and Munize, your son and daughter. I see you heading towards your office, which was in the smallest room of the flat.

At the entrance, you had posted our vigilant “Darwan Bhai”, who would only open the gate just enough to let students come in and leave, one or two at a time. You kept an eye on the safety of the children. You made it possible for Darwan Bhai to live with his family at the school.

Mrs. Manzur, you remind me of Josephine March, Louisa May Alcott’s unforgettable heroine who loved her family, loved her students and loved to write. I am wondering if you by any chance kept a journal? Like Jo, you too built a school for little women and little men where there was love, learning and play. This love transformed your students into big women and big men now spread all over the world.

The community you built to do good is now raising their hands in prayer for you and saying, “O soul at peace, return to your Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing.”

With love, regards and gratitude from Class VII of the 70s: Sabera, Shahila, Rubana, Nabila, Soheli and Kaiser.

Touching lives near and far

UMAMA ZILLUR

Dear Mrs. Manzur, There’s something really special about the community that you built and the type of leader that you were. Since the news of your death surfaced, generations of your students have been pouring their hearts out, each story highlighting special personal connections with you. Thank you to everyone who has shared their tributes to Mrs. Manzur—your words have helped me when I had none of my own.

Initially, I did not fully realise the impact you had on me with your impeccable leadership—the kind that didn’t shy away from creating your own indicators of success, that measured value beyond numbers and that always prioritised fostering a sense of community. Recently though, I noticed how strongly I hold onto those values in all my areas of work. I have been meaning to have these conversations with you, to express my gratitude to you for being the mentor and guardian that you were. But you were always so accessible, always around, always within reach. I felt no rush. I believed that you, as the institution that you built, were eternal.

Since graduation, I’ve been back in the halls of Sunbeams many,

many times—that’s the type of community that you built. It has always pulled me back. One of those times, I went back to kick-start this big little dream I had, similar to yours: Kotha. I always felt I could lean on my Sunbeams family, but the support I received from the very start was beyond my expectations. I had sent out an email about a partnership with Sunbeams while sitting at the Mount Holyoke College library. I felt your warmth all the way from the US when I learnt that the school was on board.

I am so grateful to you for opening the Sunbeams gates to Kotha and trusting me with your Sunbeams children, my “siblings”, back in 2016 when I was launching the small pilot project. During my school days, I had been called to your office many times—sometimes for getting in trouble, sometimes for small accomplishments. When we last met in your office, we were discussing Kotha. I remember you mentioned that you were ready to provide all the support I needed. You even threw out the idea of arranging special bus service if we wanted to hold Kotha’s classes after school hours. I drew so much strength from the confidence you had in me. The community you

built played, and continues to play, an integral role in my journey with Kotha and beyond.

Over the years, I have grown to become critical of this institution and its community. When something feels like a second home and a second family, you feel responsible to hold it to higher standards, to hold it accountable and to always challenge it to be better. That is how I feel about Sunbeams. My Sunbeams family will always be close to my heart and I am so thankful to be a member of this community you have built.

There was something so comforting and peaceful thinking about Sunbeams and knowing that it was, for the most part, exactly the same as I left it eight years ago. The news of your passing immediately made me think: Sunbeams won’t be the same anymore. But it has to be. I was not wrong. You, and the institution you have built from the ground up, with its seven core values—Knowledge, Leadership, Patriotism, Integrity, Humility, Confidence and Commitment—are, in fact, eternal. Your Sunbeams family will see to it.

Umama Zillur is from Sunbeams batch of 2012 and founder of Kotha, a feminist youth organisation based in Bangladesh fighting gender-based violence.

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

**MOUNT EVEREST SUMMIT
REACHED BY EDMUND HILLARY
AND TENZING NORGAY**
May 29, 1953
*Following numerous
failed attempts by other
climbers, Edmund Hillary
of New Zealand and
Tenzing Norgay of Tibet
surmounted Mount Everest,
the highest mountain in
the world (29,035 feet), on
this day in 1953.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Less refined
6 Useful skill
11 Find darling
12 Artless
13 Column type
14 Didn't allow
15 Rented
17 Furious
19 Bagel topper
20 Golfer Hogan
23 "1984" author
25 Model
Macpherson
26 Alabama team
28 Brick carriers
29 Reacted to pains
30 Stunned
wonder
31 "Hey there!"

32 Parched
33 Mushroom, e.g.
35 Billiards shot
38 Cartoon genre
41 Accepted truth
42 Henry VIII's
house
43 Answer
44 Lipstick slip

DOWN

1 "Far out, dude!"
2 Commotion
3 International
4 Lake near
Buffalo
5 Remembers
6 Building wing
7 Uttered
8 Middling card

9 Second person
10 TV's Danson
16 Wise king
17 Coffee bar order
18 Cupid's missile
20 Catch unawares
21 Tribal leader
22 Poor
24 Print units
25 Seventh Greek
letter
27 Chewy candies
31 Delicious
33 Ninny
34 "E Pluribus ____"
35 Train unit
36 Log chopper
37 Tear
39 Extinct bird
40 Screw up

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dspinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT