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LOCAL OBITUARIES

## ‘The woman inspired me’: Former Wichita State program director had impact on thousands

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OCTOBER 11, 2022 1:58 PM



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Dr. Deemathie de Silva, a longtime director of a Wichita State University program, died on Sept. 29. COURTESY PHOTO *De Silva family*

An algebra class had Linda Rhone ready to quit college.

She had already failed out of Wichita State University before going to Butler Community College, getting her grades up and then going back. Rhone, from a low-income, single-parent home, had the odds stacked against her to be a first-generation graduate.

But she did it, and more.

Rhone was able to get her bachelor's degree, then her master's and even a doctorate. She credits the late Dr. Deemathie de Silva with motivating her to keep going.

Dr. De Silva, known to many as Dr. Deema and former students as Dr. D, is credited with helping thousands of underdog students get their degrees. She was the longtime director of a WSU program that provides free tutoring and resources to students from low-income families, students with disabilities and potential first-generation college grads.

She helped secure millions in federal dollars for those students. Her ties to the business community added more money when she got notable families to set up endowments. And her work with the World Trade Council of Wichita, an organization co-founded by her [late husband, Dr. Dharma de Silva](#), has had an immeasurable impact on international business in south-central Kansas.

“They became synonymous with international business and international trade in Kansas,” WTC chair Dr. Usha Haley said. “Everything I have done I have literally stood on their shoulders.”

After an eight-year battle with cancer, Dr. de Silva, died Sept. 29 surrounded by her children. She was 83.

A celebration of life is planned for Oct. 22.

Dr. de Silva was known for her passion for helping others succeed through education, as an author, educator, gifted grant writer and international speaker. Former students also remember her for her kindness, encouragement and beauty.

The Sri Lanka native who ended up in Wichita was a member of [the respected WTC](#), which hosts diplomats and has connections throughout the world.

When her husband was excited “about some minor detail,” Dr. de Silva would reel him back in, said David Glassner, a longtime WTC board member. She would put her hand on his arm, whisper words in his ear and all would be good.

“And I saw that a thousand times,” he said. “That’s where she became Saint Deema.”

Glassner, now an executive of a Florida-based aviation company, said Dr. de Silva was the “rock of stability for Dr. Dharma,” known for being “radiant, elegant and enlightened.” Glassner said her obituary could be chapters long.

The best testament to the lives of the de Silvas are their children, who are all “off-the-chart intelligent” and yet humble and down to earth, he said. She is survived by three children and nine grandchildren. Their [oldest daughter, Dr. Harshini de Silva, died in a car accident](#).

Dr. de Silva’s surviving children are Mahi de Silva, married to Pratibha de Silva, San Francisco, California; Duminda de Silva, married to Rupa de Silva, Dallas, Texas; and Lathi de Silva, married to Paul Diefenbach, Wichita. She is also survived by multiple siblings, grandchildren, cousins and family members.

Dr. de Silva was born into a family of scholars and educators.

A great uncle, [S.F. de Silva](#), was Ceylon's (now called Sri Lanka) director of education, family said. Another relative, D.J. Wimalasurendra, who married S.F. de Silva's sister, is known as the "[Father of Hydropower](#)" after introducing the power source to the country, according to family and a letter Dr. de Silva wrote to her children on her 80th birthday.

"To commemorate this contribution the country issued a stamp with his image on it," she wrote.

Family said her great-grandfather, [Andiris de Silva](#), was the first principal of Dharmaraja College, which says it is "one of the premier Buddhist schools in the country." And her father was a Fulbright scholar and physics professor.

As turmoil started in Sri Lanka in the 1970s ahead of a civil war, the de Silvas, who were both U.S.-educated and labeled imperialists, left for Wichita, the family said. Dr. de Silva's husband, who was friends with the WSU business school dean, left shortly before his wife and children to take a job at WSU, setting up an international business program. Dr. de Silva, who was in her late 30s, came in 1977 with her children.

She started at WSU shortly after that. She also continued her passions for teaching and learning. She earned her doctorate of philosophy in 1988 while working and raising a family.

She worked for 36 years at Wichita State University, where she was a longtime director of TRIO Student Support Services, a group that offers free tutoring and resources, including loaning textbooks, to help students who face obstacles.

Dr. de Silva helped [secure \\$13 million in federal funds](#) for those students, according to WSU. She also secured endowments for multiple scholarships that pay out thousands of dollars each year to students.

The federal and endowment dollars helped “at least” 2,500 unlikely students get degrees, according to Deltha Colvin, the WSU associate vice president for college readiness and retention programs. Colvin, who was Dr. de Silva’s boss, said they spent many late nights and early mornings writing grants for the federal dollars.

“Her grant writing skills are very high,” she said. “Education was very, very important to her and those students getting an education was her drive.”

Shukura Bakari-Cozart and Rhone were a couple of those students.

Bakari-Cozart started going to WSU in the ‘90s, when she was in her 30s with three children in elementary school. She was eligible for help from student support because of her income. She went on to get her master’s degree and work under Dr. de Silva, who went from being a source of encouragement to a friend.

The two would buy little trinkets for each other. One day Dr. de Silva told her to come by her office.

“She said, ‘Oh Shukura I found this lovely cello (tree ornament) for you,’” Bakari-Cozart said, making a voice with an accent to try and sound like Dr. de Silva.

Bakari-Cozart played the cello as a child. She has had the clear cello with a gold string for 20-something years.

“She keyed in on things in your life,” she said. “She was always thinking of me.”

Dr. de Silva was beautiful, dressed elegantly and even after retirement had radiant skin that her coworkers longed for, Bakari-Cozart said.

Rhone also remembers Dr. de Silva for many things, including her outfits.

“Tiny, petite thing and when she walked through the door she owned it because she knew she looked sharp,” she said.

Rhone said not many people around her went to college. Rhone’s mother encouraged her to be a first-generation graduate.

She struggled with school, especially algebra.

A math professor told her about the free tutoring offered through the program Dr. de Silva oversaw. She started to get help but still felt it was a long shot to graduate.

Seeing her discouragement, Dr. de Silva reminded her that a degree is a process and that she could do it, but it would take time.

Rhone one day asked her about what it took to get a doctorate — not ever assuming it would be feasible for the girl who had yet to obtain a bachelor’s. But, with time and effort, Rhone got her bachelor’s degree and began teaching. Then she got her master’s and eventually her doctorate.

She’s been educating others along the way.

“The woman inspired me,” Rhone said of Dr. de Silva. “I have really been on the trail for education for a long time and Dr. de Silva will always be a face I see when I close my eyes.”

Rhone, now Dr. Rhone, was offered Dr. de Silva’s job as the SSS director in the fall of 2019. Now she gets to support and encourage students the way her mentor did. She teaches classes as well — but at Friends University instead of WSU — just like Dr. de Silva did while she was a director.

During a Christmas party for their office in 2019, Dr. de Silva came back and congratulated Rhone on her new position.

“She said ‘My favorite student, you are now the director,’” Rhone said. ‘And I said ‘I thank God for you, Dr. de Silva, I thank God for you.’”

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Michael Stavola covers breaking news at The Wichita Eagle. He’s won a national and several state awards during his six years of working at newspapers in Kansas. He finished his MBA at Wichita State University in spring 2020. Michael likes to exercise, hunt and spend time with his wife and their dog, Marley.

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