

The Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School has been providing needy children with an education since 1894. Now with classes from Kindergarten through level 12, it also offers students sound employment opportunities and an entry to higher education. Uma Velpandi was in level 12 last year when she took her final exams the day after her beloved father passed from this life. Even through her grief Uma finished at the top of her class. She went on to receive a scholarship and is now in her first year at university. Uma says that her father's last words, "you must study well," sustained her through this difficult time. She tells us her story in her own words.



*Uma Velpandi*

My father's name is S Velpandi. From his younger days he has been selling vegetables. He was very actively carrying out this business. Some time in July 2015 my father fell ill. Something was not right with his right hand and leg. He could not use his right hand to eat; nor could he walk with his right leg. He looked very worried. In the hope that he would get well he went and stayed at the pilgrim centre of Tiruchendur (in South India) for a month. He was very sad. Every day he would go to the temple. He firmly believed that he would get well. His health started to deteriorate and he was admitted to the nearby Nagercoil Hospital. The doctor in the hospital diagnosed a tumour in the head. It looked like a cancerous growth. My father was advised by the doctor to get further treatment in Chennai.

My brother brought my father to Chennai and took him to Ramachandra Hospital. A scan of his head was done. The doctor thereafter met my father and indicated to him that his end was nearing and that he would not survive the surgery. My father was in tears. Our family was terribly saddened, and we wept a lot. As my father's health was weakening we got him admitted to the hospital. We had to spend Rs 5 lakhs (Rs 500,000) for the surgery. We had to take loans and borrow money for this treatment. All of us at home were very sad. After the surgery my father stayed at his brother's house in Vettuvangeni (suburb). He was bed-ridden. My mother stayed along and looked after him.

My grandmother, brother and I stayed at a rented house in Kakkan Colony. My granny did household chores and with her earnings looked after us. During school holidays both my brother and I would go to Vettuvangeni to visit our father. My father was most happy to see both of us. We would also feel happy to see our father. At his brother's house my father suffered from a lot of pain and a lack of sleep. Once it so happened that he could not open his eyes. He was taken to the nearby hospital and given an injection. We believed and hoped he would be able to open his eyes. My father could not open his eyes. We got him admitted to Ramachandra Hospital. The doctor informed us that cancerous growth had spread all over his body and therefore the eyes would no longer open. My father was collapsing. The doctors advised us to shift my father to another hospital. He was admitted to it and he had to undergo surgery in the head. He was put on a ventilator.

On 29 March 2016 at 5 p.m. my father died. He was 40 and he died on the same date as his elder brother. My family mourned the death of my father. Every day we think of our father and tears swell up. My family remembers my father every day. After my father's death my mother does household chores and earns a livelihood. So also my grandma. Even so my family is in poverty.

I was studying in Grade 12 and my exams were in March. I had opted for the Commerce Stream. The Commerce exam was on 1 April 2016. I wrote my exam with a heavy heart. My school headmistress motivated me. I studied hard. I would think of my father every day. His last words to me were "...you must study well." I am following his words.

I stood first in my class having scored 1039/1200. This has been possible due to my headmistress only. I am doing B.Com through M G R Janaki College (a women's college near Adyar). I have got a scholarship through my school and Pudumai Penn Trust funds my education. I will study well and look after my family. My school has helped me in many ways. My family has benefitted from my school.

V. Uma