

A Celebration of the Life of Vijaya (Catherine) Claxton

9 DECEMBER 1947 – 23 DECEMBER 2009



FRIDAY, 22 JANUARY 2010, 1 P.M.
CHAPEL OF THE CHURCH CENTER FOR THE UNITED NATIONS
777 UNITED NATIONS PLAZA, NEW YORK

A Celebration of the Life of Vijaya Claxton

PRELUDE ON FLUTE

Upasana Young
UNICEF

WELCOME

Nilima Silver
Programme Coordinator
Sri Chinmoy: The Peace Meditation
at the United Nations

SONGS

“Vijaya”
and song dedicated to
the United Nations.
Words and music by Sri Chinmoy
Performed by the
**Choir of The Peace Meditation
at the United Nations**

SPEAKERS

Keith Claxton
Vijaya’s brother

Donna Fleming
Vijaya’s mother

Johnston S. Barkat
Assistant Secretary-General
United Nations Ombudsman
and Mediation Services

Andrei Terekhov
Executive Director
Office of Administration of Justice

Gordon H. Tapper
Chief, Facilities Management
Service, DM (retired)

Brian Gorlick
Chief, Office of Staff Legal Assistance

Ramu Damodaran
Deputy Director, UN Outreach Division,
DPI; President, UN Staff Recreation Council

Willard Hass
Chairperson, Steering Committee
of the former Panel of Counsel;
Vice President, U Thant Institute

Keith A. Beauchamp
Filmmaker

Bhikshuni Weisbrot
Vice-President, UNSRC Society
of Writers; UNDP staff member

POSTLUDE ON ORGAN

Martin Garratt
DGACM

PEACE DOVE COOKIES AND FLOWERS

It was Vijaya’s custom always to have
sweets in her office to welcome visitors.
Guests are invited to take a small gift
of a peace dove cookie, along with a
rose, at the end of the programme in
honour of her tradition.

SELECTED TRIBUTES TO VIJAYA

Below are excerpts from the generous outpouring of tributes received since Vijaya's passing.

From Vijaya's Family

Please join me in celebrating my sister Vijaya's life,
a life that was always directed in a positive direction,
a life that always wanted and sought purpose,
a life that recognized and celebrated the accomplishments of others,
a life that was always directed toward what we can do, not what we failed to do,
a life well and fully spent.

KEITH CLAXTON *Vijaya's brother*



“I am part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move,
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life!”

These lines by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem, “Ulysses,” mirror memories of my child, Vijaya. Ulysses was a warrior, a leader, a traveler, a protector, an adventurer — one who loved life and confronted challenges with intelligence. So was it with Vijaya. Her joy, her honesty, her sense of justice lives on in those of us who loved her. Vijaya was beauty; her beauty still dazzles me. She was independent and strong, unfazed by the fight against the English Channel, against the many confrontations that she weathered in her much too short life.

“As though to breathe were life, to rust unburnished, not to shine in use” — I never asked Vijaya for her definition of life, but just breathing, a life unburnished and not shining, would not have made the grade.

DONNA FLEMING *Vijaya's mother*

Tributes from United Nations Colleagues and Friends

I am very saddened to hear of Vijaya's passing away. I recall her warmth of spirit and intense humanity. Her strong swimming capabilities and her boundless cheerfulness. Please convey my heartfelt condolences to her family and close friends. She was a good soul.

VIJAY NAMBIAR *Under-Secretary-General and Chef de Cabinet of the United Nations*



I would like to express my sadness regarding the passing away of Catherine Vijaya Claxton. I had enormous regard for her and appreciated deeply her contribution and disposition to help in achieving the reform of the UN's internal system of justice. She worked tirelessly together with the Department of Management team in achieving this goal. Her passionate dedication to the Panel of Counsel was key in the establishment of the Office of Staff Legal Assistance to support staff. Her beautiful eyes mirrored her heart. My fond memories and high regards to her family for their wonderful daughter and sister – who was a friend to us all.

ALICIA BARCENA *UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director,
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*



Vijaya (aka Catherine) Claxton struggled for twenty years in the position of Coordinator of the Panel of Counsel and was a key advocate for reforming the system. Despite her efforts and victories, she ended up in a basement office, which produced more good work for staff than many could dream of. And she did this with almost hand-out resources. Vijaya was nevertheless able to build a credible platform to assist staff. Vijaya was successful because she worked endlessly, was excellent with people, and she cared. She was a credible voice with staff and management. While not formally trained as a lawyer, Vijaya was more knowledgeable about the rules, jurisprudence and how the system worked (or didn't) than anyone I know.

For those of us who knew Vijaya, her loss is great and seemingly unfair. Vijaya had retired from a long UN career only last summer, and she was looking forward to working again as a mediator. She would have been a forthright, knowledgeable and results-oriented mediator. Unfortunately her disease was too far progressed. I understand from the colleagues who visited her in the hospice that she fought hard to survive, as was her character.

What Vijaya created as a legal aid office for UN staff and, more importantly, what we now have in the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) as a global office, is her legacy to the United

Nations. OSLA must continue to do our best to make the internal system of UN administrative justice, of which OSLA is an integral part, the best it can be. We must do it for ourselves, for the staff — our clients, and for the memory of Vijaya.

BRIAN GORLICK *Chief, Office of Staff Legal Assistance, Office of Administration of Justice*



I met Vijaya in 1986 or so, when she worked with Cedric Thornberry in the Panel of Counsel (POC) and I worked with the Joint Appeals Board/Joint Disciplinary Committee, as Assistant Secretary. Cedric was a D-1, but after he went on to greener pastures, Vijaya practically single-handedly carried on the work of the office. Over the years, she really put the POC on the map, under often very difficult circumstances and without adequate resources. She just managed — always cheerful and willing to go the extra mile. Without her input and efforts, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance would not exist today.

MARITZA STRUYVENBERG *Principal Registrar, Office of the Administration of Justice*



I remember Vijaya, or Catherine as I knew her for most of my UN career, with fondness and admiration.

In the past two years I had the privilege of working closely with Vijaya, on the reform of the UN's internal justice system. Many people were involved in this effort. But she was the one with the true passion. She had seen a lot of injustice and unfair treatment of staff, and worked tirelessly on their behalf. She left no stone unturned, no path unexplored, to ensure that individual staff members had help in defending themselves or trying to find solutions to intractable situations. But she knew that even with the best intentions of volunteers across the UN, this was not enough. The system itself had to change.

She played a key role in championing a professionalized administration of justice system, with legal assistance and mediation provided to staff. Whether in an internal coordination meeting of the justice reform team, or in informal meetings of the Fifth Committee, she gave one hundred per cent. She was persuasive, and I believe won over many simply as a result of the transparency of her convictions. I can still remember how her whole face shone when the General Assembly approved the new system, in 2008.

Vijaya touched a lot of staff all over the world. She honestly cared for people's wellbeing, and for justice and fairness, and she was never fearful to stand up to those more powerful.

Many staff owe a lot to Vijaya, whether directly or indirectly.

In some ways, I owe her my UN career: she was the person who first interviewed me when I applied for a job at the UN 30 years ago.

MLENA DISSIN *Deputy Director, Administration and Management Outreach Division, DPI*

I am sorry to say that I only came to know Vijaya in the last years of her life. I had the privilege of collaborating with her on one of her greatest legacies — the reform of the UN’s internal justice system. There is no one here, and probably no one in the entire UN system who encountered Vijaya, that didn’t feel her deep and abiding passion for justice.

Of all of the remarkable things about this very remarkable woman was the fact that Vijaya believed and lived the core values that all UN staff members are supposed to share. She believed in the mission of this place and knew instinctively that the UN couldn’t succeed in its varied global missions without providing justice to its staff and operating by rule-of-law principles within its own walls.

But as much as I came to know Vijaya through an issue that she felt great passion for, and could say much more about her dedication, determination and fortitude, I think what remains with me most is the warmth that she exuded and the deep sense of optimism with which she approached all her endeavours. Given her role advocating for staff, it would have been easy for her to become tired, jaded, or cynical. But to the contrary, Vijaya was, above all things, a builder and a solution finder. She was also genuine, open and honest — traits that made her a good friend as well as an outstanding colleague.

I miss her good counsel and great spirit, but feel privileged to have been able to know her and count her as a friend.

KRISTINA CAREY *Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Office of Administration of Justice*



Vijaya’s death is a tragic loss not only for her family, friends and colleagues, but also for all United Nations staff members around the world. She has dedicated many years of her service with the United Nations to defend the rights of staff members in her capacity as Coordinator of the Panel of Counsel. I had the pleasure and the privilege to work with her as part of the redesign of the system of administration of justice at the UN. She played an invaluable role in this exercise, always defending zealously the rights of staff members. The last time I visited Vijaya in her office, she kindly gave me copies of her beautiful artwork including a self-portrait of herself swimming across the English Channel. Vijaya will continue to be an inspiration for all of us and will be sorely missed.

OUSMANE KANE *Chief, Management Evaluation Unit Office of the USG for Management*



I started my career in Geneva and heard of the “Claxton” woman as part of my work all the way across the Atlantic. I only met her, however, when assigned to New York. This was still early in my career, and I was not sure what to expect. She walked into our first scheduled meeting in charge! In charge of her surroundings, her situation, her life. She exuded purpose

— a meaningful reason for all that she did, personally and professionally.

Some people were intimidated by this strength — though it was always a delight and often amusing. She was quick to take on the hard fight and not infrequently made me secretly smile at her clever ways of getting to the best solution even if it meant that I conceded defeat.

She always won the respect and admiration of us all. I will remember her as the person who single-handedly carved out the important function she served at the UN and against many, many challenges. I probably was one of her challenges, and she overcame me with skill, wisdom and a lot of just plain decency, which is not always easy to find in this world. It is impossible not to appreciate Vijaya, her work and her contribution to the lives of so many. I know she will always live in my memory and I feel better for it.

MICHAEL DUDLEY *Acting Director, Investigations Division, UN/OIOS*



Vijaya's fount of wisdom streamed through every river in her life and bore many along with her. She was an inspiration to so many of us, showing us how there could be a way forward, how people could be treated with justice and with dignity. Vijaya's wit, ready smile and gurgling laugh were great pleasures for us all, and the fact that they were accompanied by a resolve of steel brought strength and comfort when most needed. She was a champion in our midst and we will miss her sorely.

JAMES A. LEE *Consultant Ombudsman, Office of the United Nations Ombudsman*



All who met and interacted with Vijaya were deeply impacted by her sincerity, warmth, inclusiveness, vibrancy, and most of all, by her profound sense of justice. I had the privilege of working closely with Vijaya over the past three years and she was not only a friend and colleague, but also a true inspiration to me. In addition to being a joy to sit and dine with socially, she was also serious about professional improvements in the informal system.

Vijaya was fully committed to the cause of justice and celebrated every milestone of progress towards the eventual reform of the justice system of the United Nations. She maintained a relentless pace to ensure that no staff member's quest for justice and fair treatment fell through the cracks, spared no effort to discuss, meet, or look at the issues from diverse perspectives. She never thought that one more meeting to resolve an issue was too much, even after she had spent an entire night working with Committees to advocate for resources and a functional and effective justice system.

For Vijaya no issue was too trivial and each case was worth a thorough review of its merits. Once she could establish that there was injustice, she was resolute in trying to ensure that justice was done. She has left an indelible mark and standard in the informal system. It is indeed cruel irony that just as the promise of a more functional and effective justice system for

the United Nations loomed on the horizon, and a greater opportunity for Vijaya to play a vital role was emerging, she was suddenly taken from us. She is already sorely missed. I certainly will miss you, Vijaya, my colleague and friend.

VERONICA LUARD *Joint Ombudsperson (UNDP/UNFPA/UNICEF/UNOPS)*



Vijaya was so full of life, energy, compassion and determination; it is incomprehensible that she is no longer among us. I came to know Vijaya over the years as a colleague and friend and admired her humanism and readiness to always stand for what is fair and right. Her dreams took her across the Channel and into the study halls of Cornell and Columbia. She was always considering the next challenge. I shall miss her dearly.

SIMONA PETROVA *Principal Officer, Executive Office of the Secretary-General*



As one who worked closely with Vijaya in the Panel of Counsel for over fifteen years, the most striking quality I observed was her determination to take action toward what she considered right and good, without regard for its effect on her own wellbeing. When facing the challenges of her UN work, Vijaya never asked the question, “Is it possible?” but only, “Is it the right thing to do?” When the answer was affirmative, action immediately followed.

SURASHRI PARADIS *Legal Assistant, Office of Staff Legal Assistance*



Vijaya’s commitment to justice and doing what was right — even when it was the rockier path — endures in the many people she inspired at the Organization in which she believed. Protecting the rights of others with tenacity and heart was just one of her many gifts, as was her ability to fill a room with laughter.

JOANNA PAUL *Legal Officer, United Nations Dispute Tribunal;
and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



As a volunteer member of the Panel of Counsel, I worked with Vijaya from 1996 to 2009. Words cannot convey the extraordinary job she did as the Coordinator of the Panel. For most of this period, she worked with a single assistant and a variety of volunteers like myself, trying to ensure that staff could get the support they needed to navigate the treacherous seas

known as the UN system of justice. She was battling against all the odds, with a hopelessly understaffed office, and having to tread a fine line between serving staff members who needed help and maintaining an effective working relationship with her employer. Needless to say, this was a situation fraught with potential for misunderstandings and bad feelings. That she succeeded as Coordinator for 20 years underlines her dedication to both the staff and the Organization, and the exceptional skills and personal qualities she brought to the job.

Vijaya leaves a rich legacy. She strove tirelessly to address the serious flaws in the system of justice, and her efforts were rewarded when drastic reforms were approved by the General Assembly in 2008 and 2009. She guided the staff of the Panel of Counsel, and taught volunteers like me just about everything we know about justice at the UN. I fully expected to continue to see her in her new role as a mediator, and to continue to benefit from her unequalled knowledge and insights for many years to come. Her untimely demise is a huge loss to the Organization. She will be very sadly missed by her former colleagues, and most especially by the hundreds of staff who have benefited from her wisdom and compassion.

CHRISTOPHER RONALD *Volunteer Counsel, OSLA, and member, former Panel of Counsel*



I first met Vijaya Claxton soon after I was appointed Secretary of the Disciplinary Committee of UNDP/UNOPS/UNHCR. She graciously invited me to lunch to talk shop. We soon realized that we not only had many interests in common but also had mutual close friends. Immediately after my stint at UNDP ended, she invited me to join the Panel of Counsel office (POC), which was located in a three-room basement office in the Secretariat building.

The POC staff consisted of a less than a handful of people that was in effect charged with providing legal support to thousands of UN staff the world over. Totally unfazed by the near impossible task of servicing such a large labour force, Vijaya Claxton had ingeniously melded a hardy band of workers and allied retirees and volunteers into a powerful law office. We were all inspired by her pioneering spirit and keen commitment to the hapless staff members strewn across the world who looked to the POC office for not only legal support but also for emotional succor as well. Vijaya successfully instilled in the POC a deep sense of commitment and dedication to the varied needs of its clientele who would otherwise have been bereft of effective legal assistance. The skeletal staff was bided over by Vijaya Claxton's noble spirit of service and cheerfully took on the daunting task before them. We saw ourselves as the proletariat of the UN legal system pitted against the bourgeoisie of the Administration's legal support team. We all had heavy caseloads and shaky contracts, but we soldiered on, fueled by the powerful spirit of service Vijaya Claxton had instilled in us. The vast majority of clients we serviced came to respect us and repeatedly plumed the POC for legal counsel in all phases of their careers and work.

But there was more to Vijaya Claxton than the workload of the POC; she had a panoramic view of the UN legal system and set herself the task of transforming and making it more re-

sponsive to the needs of the UN community. Long before it became fashionable, she started the campaign of getting the General Assembly to install a professional system of justice run by real judges. She tirelessly lobbied the various delegations of the GA for years until the idea of transforming the internal system of justice was first accepted and then a process was set in motion to make it a reality. For those who are in the know, Vijaya Claxton was the driving force behind the movement that led to the creation of the Office of Administration of Justice (OAJ). It is rather ironic that she had retired and was not available to receive the accolades due her for her selfless contributions. However, that will not detract from her achievement because in a very real sense, the OAJ will stand as her monument and a sure recognition of her patriotic commitment to the UN Organization.

The POC alumni can safely testify that it was Vijaya Claxton who single-handedly built a spirit of cooperation and cordiality within the POC which formed the cohesive element that impelled the tiny POC to pursue the claims of its large clientele without fussing over the obvious lack of resources. Vijaya Claxton kept up our spirits and was always available to provide the staff with directives, advice and solutions to knotty problems that cropped up all the time. Vijaya Claxton was so dedicated to the cause of clients and the effectiveness of the POC that even when she went on vacation or in “treatment” she freely responded to the questions we plied her about pressing problems. She never let on about any mishaps about her personal situation but was instead keenly concerned about the well-being of each and every member of the POC larger family. Vijaya Claxton’s noble spirit so pervaded the POC office that the staff developed a sibling interest in each other. This spirit of dedication has been carried over into OSLA (POC’S successor), which is in turn expanding the efforts of the POC to an ever increasing clientele base. OSLA is in effect carrying on Vijaya Claxton’s noble spirit of dedicated service (*sans* resources) to the great benefit of its wide array of clients.

It bears noting that the name she adopted in adulthood — Vijaya — which means victory, is truly apt because it sums up the outcome of her remarkable achievement to the service of the UN community.

DUKE DANQUAH *Legal Officer, OSLA; and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*



Vijaya was one of the most peace-loving and compassionate human beings I have ever met. She showed great concern for the people she served and devoted herself wholeheartedly and tirelessly to ensuring that not only were their grievances handled in a professional manner, but that they understood that she cared about their being treated with dignity and respect.

Vijaya’s work at the UN and her relations with colleagues truly exemplified the lofty objectives of the UN — promoting and encouraging peace and respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction. She will never be forgotten and her legacy will endure.

ROSE MARIE DENNIS *Legal Officer, OSLA; and Legal Officer, former Panel of Counsel*