

# Pushpa Jagoda:

## Educating the Global Child

**P**ushpa Jagoda grew up in Sri Lanka. When she first came to the United States, she had no idea that one day she would significantly contribute to the growth of early childhood education in Westchester County. Her story is the tale of a passionate woman who believes in a quality education for the youngest child.

### New in Town

Jagoda accompanied her husband to New York when he accepted employment at the United Nations. They found the international atmosphere and intellectual stimulation exciting. It didn't take them long to realize that this was a perfect place for them to settle, permanently. Jagoda became a citizen and raised their three children in Manhattan for the next 18 years. She continued pursuing her passion – the study of early childhood education – and graduated from both New York and Adelphi University, earning a master's in education.

"I loved the educational creativity in the United States, the way different cultures blended in the classroom and how that enhanced the children's view of the world," she muses. As a teacher, she says her own children were her most valuable school. "They trained me to look at teachers as a parent and, as a teacher, that helped me develop skills in selecting the right teacher for the classroom, one who is sensitive to the needs of the student," she explains.

### A Global Education

To date, Jagoda's career in early childhood education has spanned some 31 years. Over that time, she has developed an education program that reflects her experience and beliefs.

The idea of educating children under 5 was not mainstream when Jagoda first decided to open a school. Those parents who enrolled their children were looking for a preschool program that was an alternative to day care. It attracted families of all nationalities. "It is important to feel pride in your heritage and we eagerly invited parents to become involved in the classroom," she says. It is a practice she keeps to this day. "I believe in educating the global child," she adds. It's not surprising that her schools have an integrated, international focus that support and strengthen a global perspective.

### Local Action

Eventually, the family moved out of the city and Jagoda, as director of the Liberty Montessori Schools in New Rochelle and Mamaroneck, became busy applying her philosophy and implementing her program at the two Westchester sites.

The educational program at Liberty Schools features an integrated Montessori classroom where, as Jagoda describes it, "the best of early childhood education models and the Montessori philosophy are offered." Jagoda's approach is to consider the whole child. She believes it is important for children to be intellectually stimulated and socially supported. "Children are naturally accepting and 'by respecting each child's individuality in school,' personal values are not imposed but behavior is modeled that fosters continuing acceptance," says Jagoda. Children come to understand that everyone is different, that people learn differently and, consequently, focus less on comparing and exert more energy in what they can do and what they enjoy doing, she explains.



Jagoda is one of six recipients to receive the first New Rochelle Chamber of Commerce Women of Excellence Award.

### A Role Model

Serving as director of the Liberty Montessori Schools has allowed Jagoda to extend her parenting years. With her own children grown, she relishes the opportunity to be a parent to all. "I am honored that parents entrust me with their most special gift and I watch over all my students," she says.

Late last year, Jagoda was selected as one of six recipients to receive the first New Rochelle Chamber of Commerce Women of Excellence Award. The Chamber

recognized her entrepreneurial talents and the resulting contributions to the community.

Jagoda admits to being shocked when she first learned she had won the award. "Later, I found out one of the parents had nominated me," she says modestly. Accepting the award was a great honor. For her, it is about the children. "It is always an honor to teach children and to foster their love of learning," she says.

*Jean Bertuccelli Sheff is the associate editor of Westchester Family.*