

## WHEN INGENUITY SPEAKS – MS. ASHWINI SRIRAM

Ashwini is a CV alumna who graduated in 2007. While at CV, she was a vocalist on the light music team which won several prizes at inter-school cultural competitions. She currently lives in San Francisco and works as a Director of Product at Mailchimp. In her spare time, she enjoys singing and performing Hindustani classical music, writing, and reading.

### *1. How would you describe your journey in CV?*

CV was a second home to me from the age of five to sixteen and is the only school I've known. I learnt to sing, swim, collaborate, focus, and generally became a well-rounded person at Chettinad Vidyashram.

The school provided a safe environment for me to follow my curiosity, try, fail, and fall. I was lucky to have some fantastic teachers like Guruskandan Sir, Siveshwari Ma'am, KRV Ma'am, Mercy Ma'am, Shyamala Ma'am, and Jayanti Bharat Ma'am, who took genuine interest in me as a person, and made me feel seen. They instilled in me a sense of wonder and the confidence to follow my own path. I felt like I could rely on them for counsel and validation.

Outside of academics, I discovered my love for singing at CV and even briefly got into



weaving, thanks to the school's unwavering support for extracurricular activities. I always felt proud to represent our school at inter-school culturals because we truly had the best music team in Chennai! I look upon my time at CV quite fondly even after all this time and never fail to visit my teachers (and of course feast on some chocolate biscuits at the canteen!) whenever I'm in India.

### *2. You have demonstrated an incredible consistency and dedication to the field of music. Can you please share the secret of your perseverance?*

When I was younger, I wasn't as intrinsically motivated to practice music and would often skimp on it. However, as I got older, I began to see singing as something that just gave me immense joy.

What started out as an activity I pursued to satisfy my family, eventually transformed into a sanctuary in times of adversity. When the going gets tough at work or in the world, I sing. It transforms my world instantly.

That's the secret to persevering, I guess: the promise of joy!

### *3. How can students use setbacks or failures as stepping stones to improve their innovative thinking?*

Everyone faces setbacks and there's no denying that it's quite awful when it happens. Failure isn't easy to deal with. It's okay to feel bad or grieve when you fail. I've failed quite a lot in my life so far, however, when I look back on my 'failures' today, they have transformed into

blessings or lessons that have helped me build character. Although it might not feel like it at the moment, it's important to believe that one day this failure will cease to sting and will just become an interesting memory or a lesson. It also helps to read biographies of people you deem as successful. Then, you will see that your greatest heroes haven't achieved success without immense hardship, criticism, and failure.

#### *4. Who are the people you surround yourself with to keep learning and growing, and how can students find similar mentorship or networks?*

I love to read and don't shy away from drawing inspiration and energy from my favorite writers, thinkers, and poets! In my line of work, it's important to stay updated on the latest technology trends, so I read tech newsletters on Substack, Medium, and other platforms. For timeless wisdom on how to live and lead, I turn to writers and philosophers like Marcus Aurelius, Kabir, and Swami Vivekananda. I truly believe that cultivating a love for reading is the best thing one can do early in life; it ensures access to an unending supply of personalized wisdom and growth. In addition to reading, I also rely on a strong network of mentors at work and in the industry. I tend to seek out people who I naturally connect with or share common interests with, in order to establish lasting relationships.

Online platforms like Reddit, Discord, and LinkedIn are also great for building a network.

#### *5. Being an avid writer and a stellar Hindustani classical singer, how do you consistently pursue your interests while balancing your career?*

Since my job can be quite demanding and stressful, writing and singing offer much-needed respite from stress. This has been excellent motivation for me to keep my hobbies alive. When work gets busy and I struggle to find time for *riyaz* or writing my weekly newsletter, I remind myself that these hobbies energize me and that I owe it to myself to find the time somehow. Creating and sticking to a routine has been helpful too. While this requires some level of discipline that can admittedly be hard to muster, knowing that I will sing everyday from 6 to 7 a.m. has been incredibly helpful. It's one less decision to make. Now it's just become a habit!



#### *6. According to you, what impact does music have on our everyday lives?*

To me, music is meditation. It keeps me calm and centered, and gives me joy and peace. In my opinion, it's the easiest way to quiet the noise in one's mind and access a space of freedom and presence. Playing an instrument or singing sharpens focus and listening to music keeps stress in check.

One of my favorite philosophers, John O'Donohue said, "Music is what language would love to be if it could" and I wholeheartedly concur.

## *7. How do you think the art of writing and music can help one to cope with the silent struggles that they might face?*

Writing and music are both great tools of self-discovery. When I write, I find that my thinking crystalizes and I get a better sense of my mental state, my thoughts, and convictions. That's why journaling is a powerful tool for mental health. However, it's important to create a "practice" around your hobby since it's usually the first thing that falls to the side when the going gets tough and when you need it the most. When you manage to consistently practice writing, singing, or anything else that you are passionate about, it will serve as a beacon of hope and goodness in your life. At least, that's been my experience.

## *8. Have you ever used AI to blend your love for writing and music?*

I often use AI to brainstorm ideas for articles, and as a sounding board for new ideas. At work, I once used ChatGPT to write a song about a product I was launching, and used Suno.AI to generate a song in Afro-Caribbean style using those lyrics, which I then played at a large meeting. It struck a chord! ;)

## *9. Do you think the rise of generative AI poses a threat to traditional forms of art?*

As with any technology, I do believe that AI too will both assist and deter. AI needs to be regulated quickly and thoughtfully; however I think regulation will be slow in this space which could pose a threat to writers and artists. The underlying LLMs are trained on publicly available data which include creative works of art and literature which, in my opinion, is unlicensed use. However, AI could also help lower the barrier of entry into artistic fields for a large number of people.

It's certainly an ethical minefield with complex regulatory implications. The impact remains to be seen.

## *10. What message would you like to convey to your juniors who may look up to you as their idol?*

It's important to find your own idols - people who resonate with you. This can be hard to do in an environment where you feel pressured to fit in or be 'cool'. Let me tell you this: the coolest adults are people who figured out what and who they liked and unapologetically stuck with them even if they were considered weird or boring.

Don't be afraid to change your idols either, especially if they no longer align with your value system. Read widely, borrow ideas (there's no such thing as an original idea.. truly), and more importantly, lighten up and have fun!

***Successful people are not gifted, they just work hard , then  
succeed on purpose.***