



Starring in Her New Role

If only I had a dollar for every time someone asked me, “What are you doing here?”

Being considered unusual is nothing new for me. As a lead actress in Indian films, I have played an uncommon variety of roles, ranging from a giggly college girl, to a lower-middle-class woman unable to speak, to a model suffering from alcoholism. I have never run around trees in a romantic song-and-dance number, a scene so quintessential in Indian films.

Even as critics and colleagues praised my work, people remained a bit confounded as to why someone like me—a well-educated girl born and raised abroad, who neither comes from a film family nor a related field such as modeling—had entered Indian films.

The answer: I followed my passion for Indian films and acting. I wanted to do work that I found meaningful and exciting. I did not think that background mattered as much as my own hard work and talent.

With these convictions and the support of personal and professional well-wishers, I was able to carve a path and find success on my own terms.

FROM THE COHORT

BY MEGHANA MUDIYAM

When I decided to go to business school, it was a similar story. The step made perfect sense to me. As I became more acquainted with the Indian film industry, I grew interested in playing a role in the business side as well. Yet when I spoke of this idea to others, I was again met with raised eyebrows. Actors do not typically pursue MBAs. To others, it seemed odd—unless I wanted to completely shift focus.

It never occurred to me that business school could close the door on my creative career. I did not consider the two as mutually exclusive, but instead I believed my creative and business pursuits enhanced one another. When I found out that I was admitted to Wharton and Lauder, I was ecstatic. Yet I wondered if there was something to what people were saying. I grew apprehensive about the implications on the creative career that I had worked hard to establish.

I realized early into Spring Welcome Weekend that I had nothing to worry about. The first thing that struck me was the inspiring energy I felt from all whom I met, from fellow admits to current students to faculty and staff. Everyone had diverse backgrounds and visions for the future, and everyone was passionate about realizing their goals. Distinctions transcended the labels of “traditional” and “non-traditional”; everyone’s story was unique.

When I met the Lauder Program admits and students, I felt as though I had discovered a group of kindred spirits. We are all individuals who have lived and worked in multiple countries and cultural contexts, and who have taken risks professionally and personally. Such people tend to be highly adaptable and open-minded. Despite our varied global experiences and professional backgrounds, it is easy for us to relate to one another.

Wharton goes beyond merely bringing together diverse students through admissions; it cultivates diversity within its community. I am impressed by the myriad opportunities to build leadership skills.

The availability of these opportunities reflects a belief that I share: Effective leaders do not have to come from the same mold.

At the end of the day, we are at our best when we can create our own path to realize our goals, and I love that Wharton supports students’ efforts to do so.

I joined Lauder in May, beginning with the on-campus summer session and followed by Hindi track summer immersion in India. I now realize that being at Wharton will allow me to develop my existing interests and skills while cultivating new ones, rather than forcing me to completely switch gears. In fact, everyone I have met in the Wharton community has encouraged me to maintain my creative pursuits even while I am in school.

Given my background, I may be considered unusual at Wharton. However, not once have I been asked, “What are you doing here?”

Rather, I have been made to feel that it is exactly the place I should be. ■

***Meghana Mudiyaam** is a first-year Leonard Lauder Fellow in the MBA/MA Lauder Program. She attended the University of California, Berkeley, and has experience in diverse fields, ranging from internships at the India-based rural empowerment organization Mahila Samakhya Karnataka to the office of the Honorable Nancy Pelosi through the Washington Leadership Program, to her first job consulting with ZS Associates. Her love of Indian films took her to Bangalore, India, where she was a lead actress in several films.*