

Legislative page experience bolsters student's political aspirations

By Melanie Hennessey
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

What began as a neat opportunity for a Milton student has become the start of a potential career path. Vanditha Widyalkara recently completed her term serving as a legislative page at Queen's Park, where she spent five weeks working as a messenger on the floor of the Legislative Chamber.

With plenty of female role models on hand, from Premier Kathleen Wynne to Halton MPP Indira Naidoo-Harris, it's no wonder the 13-year-old turned her mind to future political opportunities.

"I would love to represent our riding one day," she said. "It was really inspiring to see them (provincial politicians) in action."

Widyalkara, a Grade 8 student at Tiger Jeet Singh Public School, said she's always been very interested in politics and enjoys watching elections.

So when she heard about the legislative page program from her neighbour, she knew right away

that she was interested in applying. "Why wouldn't I want to miss five weeks of school to go hob-knob with politicians?" she said.

“ You feel like you're really doing something important.”

Vanditha Widyalkara

During her tenure as a page, Widyalkara had to arrive bright and early at Queen's Park each day, get dressed in a uniform, be ready for an 8:15 a.m. briefing and then prepare the legislative chamber for the morning's debates.

Pages are involved in a number of activities during the day, such as delivering messages and water for the MPPs in the chamber, taking classes in legislative process and math and meeting with key legislative players like party leaders and the Speaker of the House.

"I loved working the chamber. The MPPs were all so nice," said Widy-

alankara. "You feel like you're really doing something important."

Another major highlight for the Milton youth was meeting other students from all over the province. "In five weeks we became such a close family; they all call me the mom of the family," said Widyalkara, who also served as the valedictorian of the group. "I was giving my speech and everyone was in tears. I'm going to miss them so much."

The legislative page program is open to students in grades 7 and 8 who have an interest in current affairs, have an academic average of 80 per cent or higher and get along well with peers and adults.

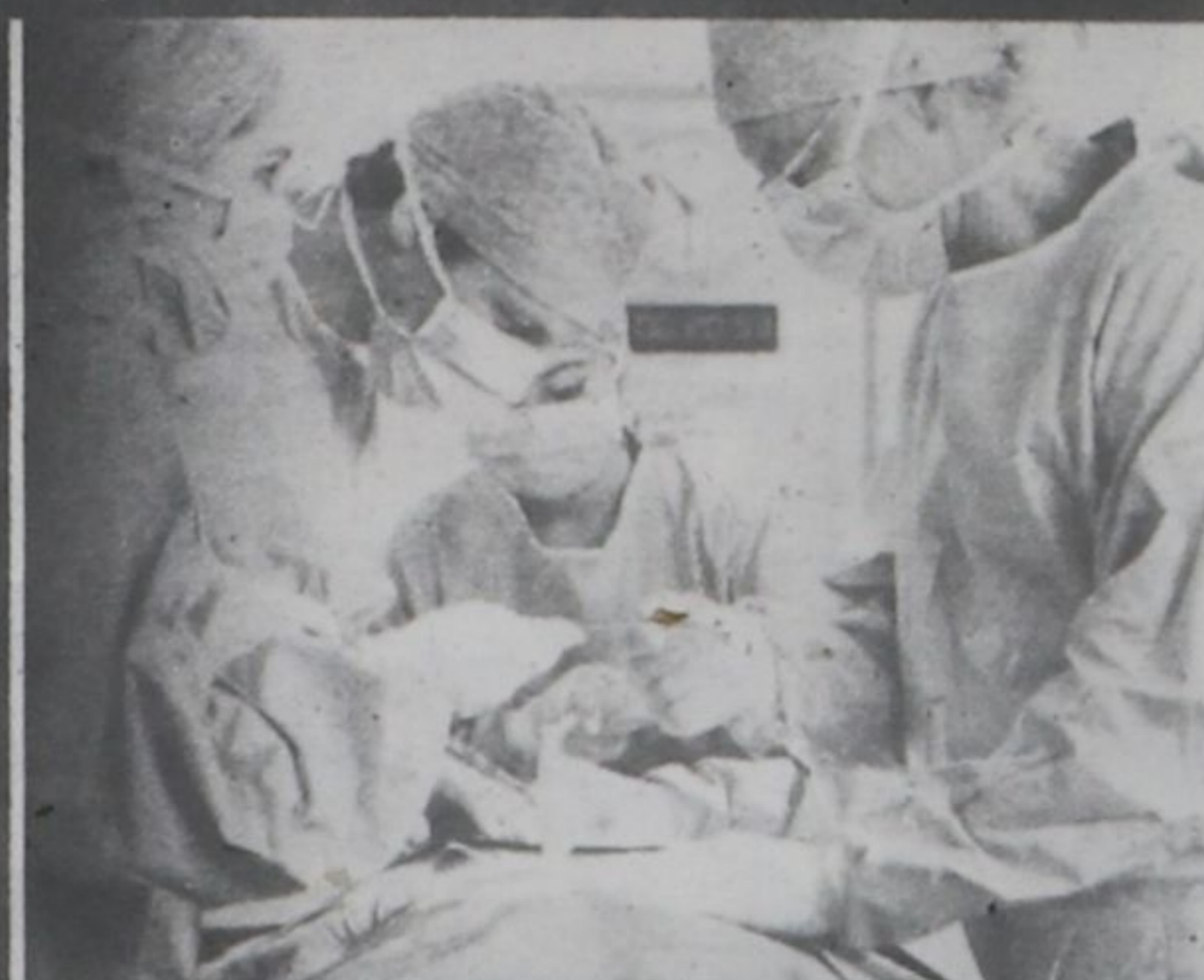
Applications are accepted for two deadlines each year, Nov. 15 (grades 7 and 8) and June 15 (grade 7 only). For information call 416-325-7457 or email pageprogram@ola.org.

Vanditha Widyalkara (right) got up close and personal with a variety of politicians, including Halton MPP Indira Naidoo-Harris, during her recent tenure as a Queen's Park legislative page. *Supplied photo*



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