Harris Wijeyasinghe: With Great Love and Passion

Posted on



Harris Wijeyasinghe as he celebrates his 75th birthday, continues his inspirational journey with love and passion.

“A bride needs to be timeless, and her wedding photograph should age with her. She has to be the same person,” explains Harris Wijeyasinghe, having transformed young women into beautiful and elegant brides for 48 years. Creative and artistic, always respecting and drawing inspiration from Sri Lankan heritage, Harris Wijeyasinghe is unique in his approach and says that he does everything with love and passion.

Anyone who meets Harris would immediately be drawn to his warm smile and easy

going nature. Harris Mama (uncle) to many, he addresses everyone as Putha (child) making you feel at ease. He narrates his life's journey as he celebrates his 75th birthday with a youthful energy and cheerfulness that is contagious and gets you immersed in his story.

"I was always interested in home affairs. I loved to cook and since my aunts and my mother were very good at sewing, I was exposed to beautiful things from a very young age," says Harris. Having lost his father at the age of 12, Harris spent his formative years at his grandmother's place with his mother, aunts and siblings on Retreat Road, Bambalapitiya. He attended the nursery at Holy Family Convent under the tutelage of Irish nuns who could not pronounce his Sri Lankan name, Harischandra, and thus from then on he was known as Harris. His primary and secondary education was at Nalanda College, where Harris did neither excel in studies nor sports. His passion was creativity and art. There were days that his uncle would say in good faith that he was like a girl because of his interests in sewing and cooking. However, his uncle was put straight when Prof Osmand Jayaratne of the Peradeniya University was hosted for dinner and he complimented Harris' cooking skills. His uncle's ridicule was quickly dismissed by the Professor who explained that some of the world's best designers and chefs are men.

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While Harris grew up in an English speaking household at his grandmother's place in Colombo with all the frills of an aristocratic atmosphere, he was fortunate to be privy to village life in Divulapitiya as well. In the 1950s when Queen Elizabeth visited Sri Lanka, his aunts attended the horse races, which was a very glamorous affair. Harris' aunty had a massive rose embroidered on her velvet skirt, the image of which is still etched in his mind. Thus, he had the best of both worlds, where he was able to appreciate the finery of the Colonial era and the rich culture and heritage of Sri Lanka. These aspects were the source of his inspiration in his profession as one of Sri Lanka's renowned designers, hairdresser and make-up artist.

"I started doing hairstyles for my cousins because all had long hair. They were my guinea pigs. Whenever, there's family functions everyone would be at my place to

get dressed," said Harris. There were times however, when he would ask his elder sister to come so that they could try out new hairstyles. Most of the times the experiments would end in fits of laughter since Harris did not know the hairstyling methods. But he says it was such learning experiences that made him who he is today. Harris never wanted to be an employee, he wanted to build his own business where he was the boss.

With the family circle getting to know that Harris was a budding designer and beautician, in 1972, he received the opportunity to dress his first bride. "The mother of the bride who was a distant relative asked me how many brides I had dressed so far, and I said ten, which was a small white lie to start the business," Harris says with laughter. All went well, and this was the beginning of Harris' career, with brides soon queuing up to be dressed by him.

Harris narrates another memorable experience. At that time, all make-up was brought from abroad, and was far too light for the Sri Lankan skin color. This was a worry for Harris and he wanted to rectify this. Being a very good cook and knowing the art of food coloring, he decided to add a drop of egg yellow into his base and shake it well to get the desired color. He did the make-up of many brides in this way and soon became the talk of the town with other beauticians such as Ramani Fernando, requesting for his concoction as well. To this date the duo reminisce about such experiences.

"I always give priority to my profession because that is my bread and butter," said Harris. A self-taught designer, hair stylist and make-up artist, Harris mastered the trade on his own. As he says, "We crawled first and then learnt to walk. Therefore, our legs are firmly on the ground." Harris always took a unique approach and the bride was always the focal point when designing the ensemble for a wedding. By the time Harris had reached about 15 years in service, he had made a name for himself. His contemporaries are Kirthi Sri Karunaratne, Errol Wijesekera, Ramani and Ramzi.

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Dressing a bride in those days was a pleasure says Harris as they appreciated simple yet luxurious designs. The grandness and elegance of that era was an inspiration to Harris. As a self-taught professional, Harris would always perfect his work. His bridals were exquisite with various techniques used to ensure perfection. “In the old world era people were asking for the right things, I would have many discussions and come to a mutual agreement to fulfil their requirements. That is the success. If I had just assumed that I was right all the time, then I would have gone only on one track,” explained Harris. With years of experience, Harris can immediately determine what is suitable for a bride. “I feel that a bride in lace is very elegant and for Eastern bridals the Indian silks are beautiful”, said Harris. Explaining further, “I feel that the Hindu bride is the most respected. They are simple in their manner, and whoever they may be in the world they would remove their shoes and they drape the saree in a manner so that the body is covered.” The Kandyan in its true form says Harris should not be altered in the name of fashion, because it is beautiful as it is. He always believes that the bride should be exquisite, simple yet elegant reflecting purity and charm. “Brides ask me to do revealing jackets for the bridal. But I always tell them that on the wedding day, your body should be only for your husband and should not be shown to the world,” says Harris.

“The colours of the bride and her retinue should be subtle not loud, because a wedding should not become a flashy party, it has to be charm. The bride should be a highlight. Whether it is a day or night wedding I always prefer pastel shades”, explains Harris. “If I do use color then the bride needs to have the charisma and the personality to have such maids so that she always stands out”, he further added.



Harris grew up at his grandmother’s house on Retreat Road, Bambalapitiya.

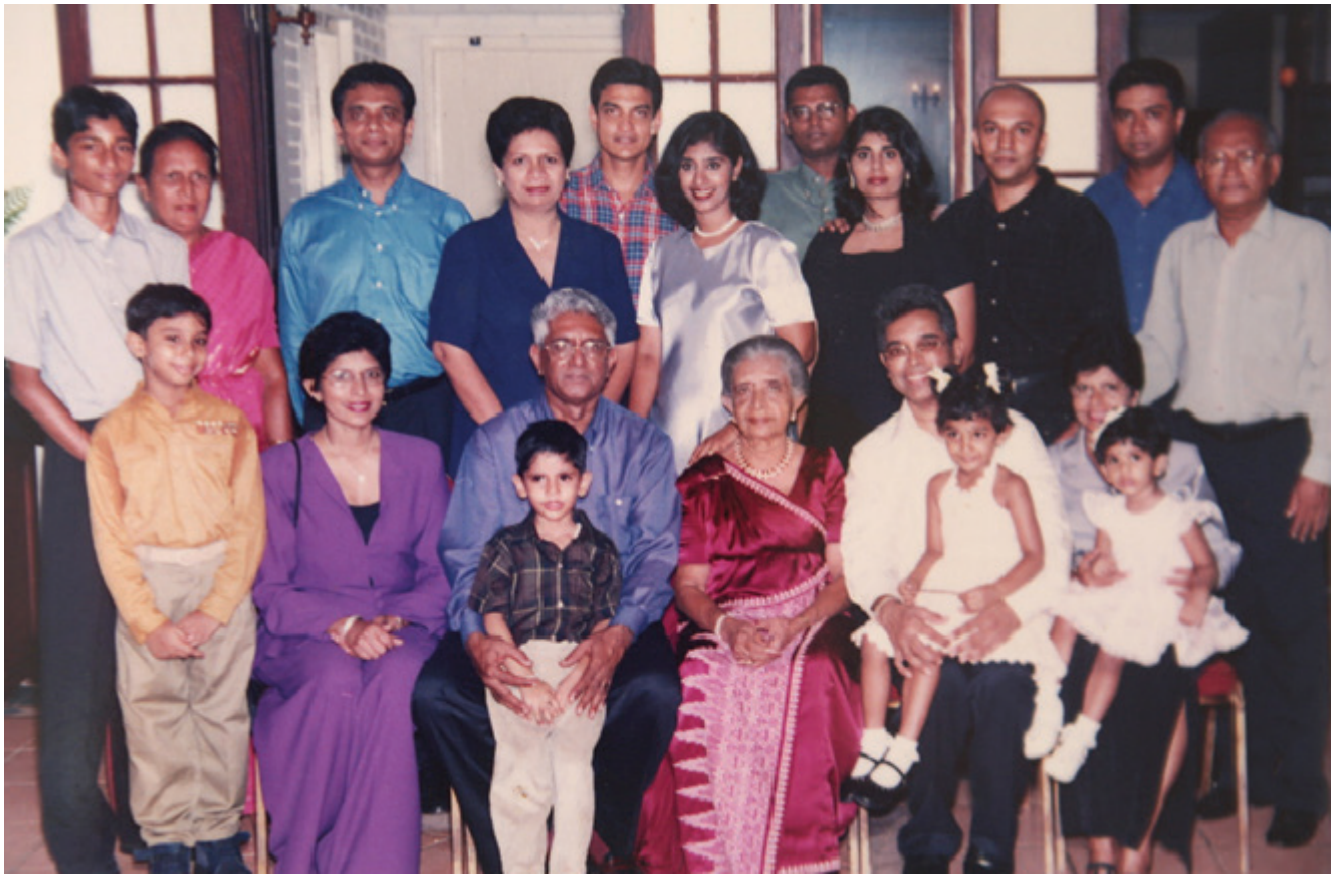


Harris’ parents, Dona Sophaya Soma Weerasekera and Henry Kusumaratna Wijeyasinghe in 1939.

One of the most memorable moments in Harris’s career was the dressing of Dulanjali Premadasa. He had the privilege to dress the daughter of an incumbent President of the country. There were many challenges, because he had to keep in mind the requirements of everyone. Yet, Dulanjali was a simple girl who had confidence in Harris. He persevered to ensure that he gave the bride the best,

which included trips to Singapore and much trepidation, and created a beautiful ensemble that was an exquisite olive gold bridal that had been dyed and hand-worked by Harris.

Harris’s forte in fashion, beauty and design is not limited to bridals but to all aspects of the field. Dressing stars such as Yashodha Wimaladharma has displayed his versatility in all types of genres. There were times when people said he is only good at Kandyan or Sri Lankan dressing or styles, but he dispelled all those myths with his work.



Harris with his family.



The beginning, first bride, Mangalika Weerasekara in 1972.



Dulanjali Premadasa was dressed by Harris for her wedding in 1990.

“Working with Yashodha is a great privilege because I learnt a lot by doing her face and also designing clothes. Because she is a character actress, someone who can work into anything. I got the opportunity to work on different styles. It is such a privilege to work with such a star. She was the right canvass for my art,” Harris says proudly.

“My first fashion show was in 1987 with 115 models parading on the catwalk. Rosy Senanayake was the reigning Mrs World and she with her husband Athula in wedding attire, were the grand finale of the fashion show. Upeka was the Hindu bride and Achala Alles the Christian bride. Gamini Fonseka’s two daughters participated as well. The fashion show was in aid of the Cancer Society, and was done sans sponsors. We had lovely arrangements with photographers so that they could display their talents. Perin Captain, said the funds collected were the most that they have ever received from a fashion show,” says Harris of his many achievements. The fashion show at Hilton Colombo on its opening day was also by Harris and was done on a grand scale.

Harris believes he has a balanced life. As he explains, “my profession comes first, it is my bread and butter, then my family comes second. The third is my religion because that guides me. And music is a tranquiliser that soothes the senses.” Being content with himself and his life, Harris enjoys simple pleasures such as preparing meals for anyone that walks through his doors. Music and singing, entertaining and laughter brings joy.

“I have analysed a man’s life. 27 is the young man, a young man becomes a man at 32. And, then from 32 to 35, the man becomes mature. I believe a man should get married before 35. It was at 35 that I got the feeling of whether I am getting married. Since I had my family I did not feel lonely. At 35 I decided that I would not get married because both sisters were married and, my mother was with me. I thought my mother cannot be the second lady in the house, she has to be the first. It was for this reason I made the decision to remain unmarried”, he said. “Though I am not married I have my siblings, my nephews and nieces and grandchildren. We are very close, they look after me and I them,” Harris further elaborated.

Harris’s love for his mother is profound, “I loved my mother very much. She was always there for us. My father passed away when she was only 37 and she had to bring up five children on her own. She received many proposals but refused. When people said that she was carrying a great weight, she would always say that for a tree her fruits are not heavy. Even after I bought the house, I always wanted to give her room in my house. Until we moved here, I was not sure whether she would really come. Somehow it happened. I have always told my siblings that I consider her as my mother and I will not wait for anyone to fulfil my responsibilities. They too cared for deeply and looked after her. She loved life. Even on her 95th Birthday she danced with me. She used to sing very well. Even played the piano,” says Harris emotionally.



Harris dressed Damayanthi, his youngest sister for her wedding in 1983.



Upeka as a Hindu bride for the Hilton opening fashion show in 1987.



Yashoda Wimaladharma beautiful in western attire, dressed by Harris.



A Kandyan bride dressed by Harris in 2010.



Harris with his niece, after dressing her for her wedding.



The Bridal Elegance Fashion Show featuring Rosy and Athula Senanayake in 1987.

“At my 75th, I always look forward to tomorrow, what can I do better… I am always learning because you should always be able to hold yourself for tomorrow. That gives me the energy to live for the next day.”]



Kirthi Sri Karunaratne, Harris Wijeyasinghe and Ramzi Rahaman.

Harris always sought ways to help others, and in 1982 he decided to work in the surgical unit at the General Hospital as a nurse on a voluntary basis. “I used to wear a white uniform with a simple badge, though I was 35 at that time I looked like I was 23! No one recognized me and even if they did they never acknowledged me,” remembered Harris. Then, one day for a very big surgery, Harris had to accompany the patient to the operating theater. The Orthopedic surgeon was the famed Dr

Rienzie Pieris, seeing Harris he looked at him a couple of times and finally recognizing him said, “Harris you wish to go to heaven someday”. In fact, Harris had dressed the good doctor’s daughter for her wedding.

Buddhism is very much part of Harris’s life as from younger days he would participate in almsgivings and go to the temple with his grandmother and mother. Furthermore, when visiting their hometown Divulapitiya, going to the temple was the norm. “The Loku Hamuduruwo having seen my horoscope asked my mother many times to ordain me. But I did not want to as that was not the path I wished to follow,” said Harris. For him, Buddhism is part of his daily life, where one practices philosophy. “People think that going to the temple and placing some flowers is Buddhism that is not so. Buddhism is a philosophy. I always explain to young people the meaning of a simple action of lighting an oil lamp or worshipping with flowers”, he further elaborated.

“At my 75th, I always look forward to tomorrow, what can I do better. I always celebrate my birthday with a Pinkama, where everyone joins with me to make it a meaningful and special day. I am always learning because you should always be able to hold yourself for tomorrow. That gives me the energy to live for the next day. I never have any expectations and I do everything with love and passion”, says Harris with a kind smile.



Harris and his mother on her 90th birthday.



Mother and son had very close relationship.



Harris and his mother invoke blessings at the Ruwanwelisaya, Anuradhapura.



An endearing visual from a song sung by Harris.



Harris in Divulapitiya. Time spent in the village inspired him greatly.