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Vinfen honors director who serves with

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 CORRESPONDENT

Amali De Zoysa feels that her proudest achievement is helping others achieve goals of their own.

"The most rewarding part of my job is when our clients really feel that they've achieved something, and that we had a little role to play in that," said the 28-year-old De Zoysa, a native of Sri Lanka who currently works as a program director at a Vinfen psychiatric rehabilitation residence in Roslindale.

De Zoysa was recently rewarded for her work when the Vinfen Board of Directors awarded her a \$4,500 scholarship, which will go toward for her master's degree in educational counseling at UMass-Boston.

"She's sort of the whole package," said Steven Ponte, a senior program director at Vinfen who nominated De Zoysa for the scholarship. "She's able to be firm, yet compassionate ... there's really no ceiling for her."

De Zoysa started working for Vinfen four years ago after receiving her bachelor's degree in psy-



PHOTO BY MARK THOMSON

Amali De Zoysa, left, shares a laugh with Nancy Lackey, a resident of a home for mentally challenged women in Roslindale. Vinfen recently honored De Zoysa, who is site manager of the group home.

chology and anthropology from Middlebury College in Vermont. After working for three years as a

caseworker and an assistant program director, she was promoted to be program director last year.

"As a caseworker, I was responsible for my clients," said De Zoysa. "But as a director, I am a

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manager, and I also have staff to manage, and there's a lot of problem-solving I have to manage every day at work. I am responsible for my staff and all the clients in my program."

De Zoysa currently directs a residence that acts as a transition house for women who are preparing to live independently while recovering from mental illness. According to De Zoysa, the most common illness for women in her program is schizophrenia.

"We help them a lot with managing their medicine, helping them manage their money well, knowing how to take care of their personal space, like learning how to do chores and doing them fairly often," said De Zoysa, who said the chief goal of her program is preparing residents for the challenges they'll face when they live on their own again.

One of the program's most recent successes is Katherine Dunn, who has been a resident in De Zoysa's house for the past year and plans on moving into her own apartment by the end of the year.

"The [Vinfen] staff being here means there's something to lean upon," said Dunn, who was first hospitalized in 1974 and has been hospitalized many times since. "I've learned to trust people more, and it's important to learn that."

Dunn also praised De Zoysa for her work ethic.

"She's very efficient, and she gets things done," she said. "I bought a printer and a camera at Microcenter, and I needed to return it. She helped arrange a staff trip to help me bring it back, which was something she didn't have to do for me."

But even though De Zoysa takes satisfaction in successes such as Dunn, she said that working as a

program coordinator for Vinfen can be very taxing.

"There's a lot of stress involved, and we do have a lot of turnover," said De Zoysa, who said that retaining staff on Vinfen's state-funded wages, which typically start at around \$11 an hour, was very difficult. "It's very hard to find people who are willing to work for that level of pay."

In addition to staffing issues, De Zoysa said that clients with serious illnesses often have difficulty in fully understanding the situation they are in.

"There are some clients who it's almost impossible to get them to understand it's something that is very biological, that it's nothing to do with them," said De Zoysa. "We try to let everyone know about their illness and what their diagnosis is, but most of the time it's surprising how they don't even know what their diagnosis is."

Nevertheless, De Zoysa and her staff said they found their work rewarding.

"You have real satisfaction in what you do," said Stephen Akinkuolie, a residential counselor who has worked in the Roslindale residency for the past three years. "One woman I worked with here lost 80 pounds within two years."

Akinkuolie added that he liked working for De Zoysa because she had "an open administration."

"There's nothing difficult for me to work here," said Akinkuolie. "We work as a team."

Despite all the praise she has received from her co-workers and her clients, De Zoysa has remained humble. When asked why she deserved to receive a scholarship from Vinfen, she responded that "there's a lot of people who do the same type of work who are also worthy of the scholarship."