Of ties that bind

As the Methodist Girls School celebrates its 120th anniversary, **Low Yit Leng** chats with some of its alumni who reminisce about their school days
More than 120 years ago when educated Indian gentlemen welcomed the opportunity to educate their daughters with the assistance of the American Methodist Mission, Sophia Blackmore, a young missionary from Australia, arrived in Singapore. She came from India at the request of Rev William Oldham, the first Methodist pastor in Singapore and founder of Anglo Chinese School, who wanted a woman missionary to teach the girls.

The Tamil Girls’ School, the first school for girls established by the Methodist Mission, was opened in 1887 with only nine Tamil girls. It used a house in Short Street which was offered rent-free by an Indian gentleman, Rama Krishna Rao, while other gentlemen contributed money to help pay the teacher’s salary. From those humble beginnings, it grew into the Methodist Girls School.

Blackmore, the school’s first principal from 1887 to 1892, was a strong advocate of education for girls and women. She spent a lot of her early days in Singapore making home visits. Her dedication helped create a special bond between teachers and students that remains a hallmark of the school. She also founded a girls’ boarding home which was first known as the Deaconess Home and later renamed Nind Home. It housed not only women missionary teachers but also orphans and girls who came from the region to study.

By 1891, the Short Street shophouse was too small for the school, which moved to the Christian Institute in Middle Road and changed its name to Methodist Mission Girls’ School. As the school grew taking in more students (and even boys accompanying their sisters) from different races, it later became known as the Methodist Girls School.

In 1900, the school returned to Short Street – this time to a new building — and also offered kindergarten classes. Eight years later, it expanded to include secondary classes. Before long, the premises were again overcrowded, so the secondary school girls moved to Mount Sophia.

The school’s rapid growth was checked only by the Second World War. After the war, despite the lack of materials and facilities, the school flourished again under the principal, Mrs Ellice Handy.

The Methodist Girls School became an independent school in 1989 and moved from Mount Sophia to its current location at 11 Blackmore Drive in 1992.

Many of the MGS girls live up to the school motto: “To master, to grow and to serve.” Among the well-known alumni are Belinda Ang, a judge of the Supreme Court of Singapore; Jocelyn Yeo, the former national swimmer; Tina Tan Leo, president and chief executive officer of The Link Boutique; Eleanor Wong, playwright and director of the Legal Skills Programme at the Law Faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS); and Abigail Sin, one of the most celebrated musicians in Asia.

Another famous alumnus is Kwa Geok Choo (wife of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew) who was a King’s Scholar and graduated with a double first in law from Cambridge University. The school also produced luminaries like Constance Wee Sai Poh or Mrs Goh Kok Kee, renowned for her work in the Planned Parenthood Federation when there was little awareness about birth control methods and abortion was illegal, and Phyllis Chia (Mrs Robert Eu), the first woman to be elected commissioner in Singapore’s first municipal election in 1949 and who was also involved in consumer issues.
Fang Ai Lian, chairman of Ernst and Young Singapore, also chairs the board of management of Methodist Girls School. "I'm very privileged to have been asked to serve on the board of management of the school," says Ai Lian.

She is impressed by the school spirit and the collective effort of everyone involved — teachers, parents, church and students — in making the school a cherished part of the community.

"When you encounter people who do everything and anything just because they want to send their children to the school, it's a wonderful feeling," she says.

Ai Lian, whose daughter studied at MGS as well, feels one of the most endearing qualities of the school is reflected in its motto "To master, to grow and to serve". "This is well entrenched in the students and has served members of the alumni very well," observes Ai Lian, who is active in community work and serves as president of the Breast Cancer Foundation and the Home Nursing Foundation.

"I have seen how the strong bonds and friendships developed in MGS have become a great asset. We feel comfortable with people and this makes it easy to engage with people from different walks of life," she says.

"MGS girls have always been strong in language skills and they excel in drama. We have many playwrights from MGS. MGS girls are always known to be very creative."

MGS has earned the prestigious Singapore Quality Class certification for achieving world-class management standards.

While the school has consistently produced top students who have won A1s and awards, Ai Lian points out it also provides a progressive and innovative environment for a well-rounded education. "We need to ensure that the school is always responsive to the changing environment so that our girls have the ability to contribute and take on a different and exciting world," she says.

"There's a lot of competition out there and there's no resting on our laurels. We can't rely on our past glory. While we continue to produce students who score 10 A1s, we have also developed our own curriculum to provide innovative programmes that have been well received and are doing well. We also have enrichment programmes that take our kids to various places so that they learn things that you cannot find in textbooks."
Dr Anne Tan Kendrick
Consultant radiologist and former president of the Association of Women Doctors

Dr Anne Tan Kendrick, a consultant radiologist who also specialises in neonatal, paediatric and women's imaging at the Raffles Hospital, was a role model even when she was a student at MGS.

A top student, Anne was also very athletic. Besides being an Asean Schools athlete and school swimmer, she was the “The Majulah girl” who led the school in singing the National Anthem, “Majulah Singapura”, from the PA system outside the principal’s office.

“MGS has a strong foundation in moral values. The girls are brought up to be well-mannered, decent, and thoughtful, and to serve the community — this has been one of the biggest factors in making it one of the most highly sought-after schools,” she says.

She praises her teachers. “Some were more interesting than others. We also had a lone male science teacher during our time who could be a bit cheeky and chauvinistic. One of the most memorable figures in MGS was our pretty Primary Four form teacher, Miss Chan. She would fling our books out of the window if the work was substandard. She was also in the NCC, so we didn't dare mess with her,” she smiles.

For Anne, the most endearing qualities of MGS girls are: “They make really good friends. My days in MGS were some of the happiest in my life because we played most of the time!”

Anne comes from a family of doctors — both her parents were doctors and her elder brother, Ian Tan, also studied medicine. She went to Cambridge and Oxford and became the first radiologist outside Europe and North America to receive the Caffey award from the Society of Paediatric Radiology for her work on diagnosing biliary atresia using ultrasound.

The former head of Paediatric Radiology Service at KK Women's and Children's Hospital also served as president of the Association of Women Doctors. She lobbied for the removal of the quota for women who wanted to study medicine at NUS in 2003.

Anne, who is expecting her fourth child, continues to be involved in community work and is also known for her love of new challenges — she has been participating in aquathlons.

“When I’m not pregnant, I love running, swimming and dancing. I took up track and field again after many years and run and jump for Singapore Masters. Our women’s 4x100 and 4x400m relay teams have been winning medals in overseas meets over the last few years. Recently, I had a go at the TAS aquathlon and enjoyed it very much too. I also belly-dance and have learnt some exotic dancing in my spare time. I love to play the piano and jam with my sons at home for fun. I still like to sing, although it's usually lullabies or the Sound of Music-type songs with the kids these days.”
Mildred Tan has been recently appointed chairman of the Films Appeal Committee and won public recognition for her services to the community when she was awarded the PBM in the 2007 National Day Awards. She is also on the boards of the National Family Council, the Making Businesses Pro-Family Workgroup, the Ministry of Education’s COMPASS Committee (Community and Parents in Support of Schools) and Singapore Workforce Development Agency.

Mildred studied at MGS between the Sixties and the Seventies. “My parents sent me to MGS because it was a Christian school. They were good friends with Yong Nim Djim (father of Anna Tham who later became the principal of MGS) who encouraged my parents to send me to MGS.”

Like many former MGS girls, Mildred has fond memories of school. “I was a very ordinary student,” she says modestly. “Unlike students now, we could be involved in many extra-curricular activities. I was active in many things such as the Girls’ Brigade, drama and choir, and also Christian fellowship. It was fun to spend time with friends outside the classroom.”

Most memorable was her final year at school. “After nearly a decade in school, suddenly in the last year, you realised that you had been in a wonderful institution and Mount Sophia was like a second home. All the Secondary Four girls knew that this was the final year and they were going to leave the school and go on different paths and you knew you would miss the people who had shaped your lives,” she says.

“A lot of us started writing to each other. The interaction with the teachers also intensified. The teachers were always worrying about us. They were trying to get us to do well in our O levels.

“I would describe MGS girls as people who have a passion for life. Even today, when we go back to school, we find the MGS girls have a love for life and, yes, they are very excitable and love to scream,” she laughs.

When asked about the most endearing quality of MGS girls, she replies, “They are helpful. It is the kindness and openness that is wonderful. We may not meet often, but when we do, we feel the friendship and the warmth immediately.

“The MGS motto left an indelible mark on me. I felt the need to give back to the community. All of us are truly blessed in many ways. We should give back to others.”
After globe-trotting and making her mark as an outstanding musician and conductor, MGS alumnus Wang Ya-Hui has returned to Singapore. Today she is music director and associate professor at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore — a conservatory created in collaboration with the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, USA, where she studied.

“When I was young, I was very athletic and would have loved to play netball and other sports, but I played the piano since I was five and my mother insisted I shouldn’t do anything that might hurt my hands,” smiles Ya-Hui. Her elder sister, Ya-Lin, also went to MGS. “It was thanks to my sister that I was able to go to MGS,” says Ya-Hui.

The Wangs from Taiwan settled in Singapore in the 1970s. “My parents wanted us to have an excellent education and also to learn English. MGS was not a school easy to get into, but my mother who was a teacher at a top private school in Taiwan met the then principal, Mrs Kandasamy. She told Mrs K that my sister was very smart and would be a top student in MGS if she was given a chance.

“My sister did very well and it paved my way to MGS. However when I was at MGS, all the teachers would identify me as Ya-Lin’s sister because she was so good in her academics. I wanted to be different and I knew that my talent was in music. It was one area where I was better than her,” she laughs.

“I won national music competitions when I was in Secondary Two and another one in Secondary Four for the Yamaha Electone organ. I represented Singapore in the Southeast Asia competition in Jakarta, and when I won that, I went to Los Angeles to compete internationally. I was the first from Singapore to win the third prize. At that time, the school principal Anna Tham was worried about my participation in the competition because the O-level examinations were just a month away. However, my mother was very supportive and she made me concentrate on something that I was good at,” recalls Ya-Hui, who did well in her exams and joined National Junior College.

She got a scholarship and left Singapore for music studies when she was 17. “I’m happy that after 20 years, I’ve been given the opportunity to come back. MGS has a lot to do with my returning to Singapore because the bond with the girls is still very strong. The teachers let us be who we are and the MGS girls have a lot of leadership qualities. They are more daring. When I was in junior college, some MGS girls went to the teacher and said, ‘You should have her (that’s me) as our choir pianist.’ There’s no shyness when it comes to recognising talent.”

Ya-Hui also points out, “MGS also allowed me to organise and perform in many music events. That helped me tremendously when I began my conducting career. It gave me the confidence to be my best when I worked with world-class symphony orchestras.

“I’m very happy to see many of my school friends,” says Ya-Hui, who has been back for nearly a year. There’s a Chinese saying that clothes must be new but friends must be old. It’s great to have old friends who are non-musicians as they add a different dimension to my life because most of my friends have always been musicians. It’s great to have friends who are accountants, bankers and neurologists for a change.”