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St Pat's class of '55 gets together

More than 30 old boys in their 70s relive memories of school and convent girls

By Amelia Tan



A rousing reunion for the class of 1955 at St Patrick's School on Monday. Some of the old boys, who are aged between 70 and 74 years old, flew in from the UK and Australia for the gathering. --

PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

EVERY first Monday of the month, Mr Matthew Kheng makes a 15-minute journey by bus from his condominium at Bayshore Road to the East Coast Park to meet his classmates from St Patrick's School class of 1955.

The retired prison officer joins about 20 other silver-haired men aged from 70 to 74 in Komala's Restaurants, where they catch up on the old days.

Some of the men are older as they started primary school later because of World War II.

During those few hours, Mr Kheng, 74, switches from being the grandfather of two women in their 20s to his old nickname of 'The Bullet', the star sprinter who won numerous gold medals in inter-school track and field competitions - and the hearts of many convent girls.

The gatherings start at 4pm and are meant to end at 7pm, but more often than not carry on until their wives start calling, late in the evening.

'Time flies when we meet. We have so much to catch up on,' said Mr Kheng.

It has been five years since the monthly Monday gatherings started.

The same class also gathers once every two or three years at their alma mater in East Coast Road to tour the campus, take photos and end the night with a buffet dinner at the school.

On Monday evening, the fourth such party was attended by more than 30 old boys, including three teachers who are in their mid- to late 80s.

Mr Choo Cheok Hai, 82, who taught the class maths, said: 'Although they are much older now, to me they will always be the playful boys who sometimes did not do their homework. I am touched that they still remember me after so many years.'

A few of the men flew in from Britain and Australia specially for the reunion.

For many, their connection to the school started with their fathers who studied at St Joseph's Institution, a brother school of St Patrick's.

And the connection has continued with their sons and grandsons, many of whom have also gone on to study at St Patrick's.

Watching them, it is as if the men never left school. Overheard when they toured the campus: 'Some boys used to sneak convent girls to the back of the school for dates. We know who they are!' and: 'The toilets were haunted, I swear I saw something.'

St Patrick's School was set up by La Salle Brothers in 1933.

Patrician Society president Derek Scully said the old boys from the class of 1955 are the oldest alumni who still meet regularly.

'Their friendship was not just formed in the classroom, they competed in sports and had lots of fun together. Students these days are focused on their studies and might not have the chance to form such friendships. They remind us of what school should be about.'

The men are so boisterous that it took about 10 minutes for designated class photographer Jimmy Chew, 73, to gather everyone for the group photo.

His calls of 'Boys, fall into line' fell on deaf ears and it took Mr P. Ganesan, 74, a retired policeman and erstwhile house captain at the school to get everyone to take their places.

Mr Kheng and a few others cobbled together a contact list of all 44 boys in their class back in 1995, before they met for the first time in 40 years. Seven have died and a handful have migrated overseas. Now he rings everyone who is in Singapore on the last Saturday of each month to remind them of the gathering at Komala's.

For a year before Monday's dinner, he and a few others e-mailed the ones overseas to remind them about the reunion in school.

Mr Robert Mitchell, 72, a retired teacher who lives in Sydney and who had not been back in Singapore for more than 30 years, said that at first he was not keen to come back because of the cost of the plane ticket.

'But I learnt that my old classmates were planning to pass the hat around to pay for my ticket. I was very touched and I promised them that I will be back,' he said. He flew back for the party and will be in Singapore for a month.

The men say they want to repeat the big reunion in a year or so, though they don't know who will be left.

'Each time we meet, we can see that some of us are getting weaker. We would like to meet more often to renew the bonds that we made when we were boys,' said Mr Kheng.

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