

CHAPTER

3

Portrait of an Old Free

FORTIS ATQUE FIDELIS
(Strength with Fidelity)

“The angšana trees are located around the edge of the all-purpose school field and when they were in bloom, the flowers were a golden yellow and had a beautiful scent.”

Soo Khee Chee

Founding director
National Cancer Centre



Speak to Old Frees about their time in school and chances are you will be moved by their unbridled passion for their alma mater. And they all agree on one thing — that it was a privilege to have been educated in Penang Free School (PFS) and to have imbibed the school spirit and traditions.

All reminisce fondly about their time in school, the life-long relationships built up with fellow students that have endured to this day and of the headmasters and teachers who have helped to mould them and instil the right values.

Right from the start, being selected for admission into the school alone was tantamount to fulfilling a dream. The aura of the school, its academic reputation and its strong traditions were a beacon for primary school students preparing to enter secondary school. As it was the top choice, students in feeder schools scoring the sufficient amount of marks in their primary school

leaving examinations to enter PFS knew that they would be the “cream of the crop”, thus spurring them even further to do well during their time there.

Professor and emeritus consultant at the Division of Orthopaedic Surgery at the National University Hospital (NUH) **Lee Eng Hin** recalls, “As a 12-year-old, setting foot for the first time in PFS was a daunting experience. I was awed by the sheer size of the school, its sprawling grounds and the prospect of studying in the best school in then Malaya.”

Echoing his feelings, senior consultant and former founding head of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, Singapore General Hospital (SGH) **Peter Lim Ai Chi** said, “When we all first entered school, we were young and looking for direction. The school gave us that as well as a sense of belonging.

“It was a school steeped in traditions which we grew to appreciate. The fact that



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One of many get-togethers of Frees.

you belonged to an institution which is so august was something to be proud of and became part of you — its many principles helped to shape us and hold us in good stead later on in life.

“It was inevitable that as we all grew up bearing the school’s name and reputation, we have remained very loyal to the school long after we left it and the bond among Old Frees whenever they get together is very strong.”

Even for the girls who studied only two years (in the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms) from the age of 16, the school’s ideals and what it stood for rubbed off on them. Retired deputy director, Schools West, Ministry of Education, **Betty Ooi Poh Gek** said, “There was a culture of diligence in the school and the motivation to do well. It seemed as if there was an internal engine inside us revving and wanting to do well. We were aware that Frees were illustrious

and so it was internalised in us to be the best that we could be.”

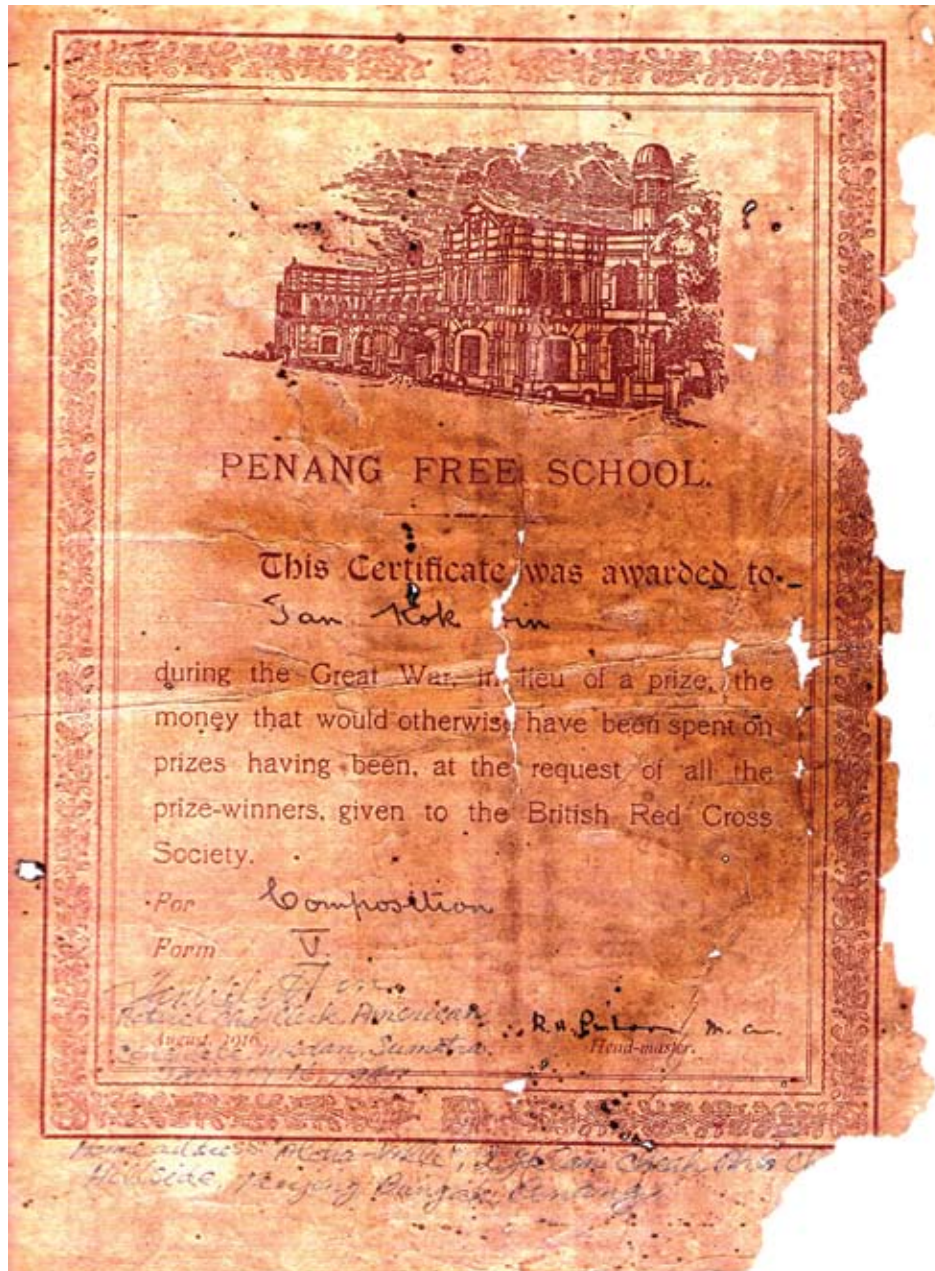
EMPHASIS ON ALL-ROUND EDUCATION

What impressed Old Frees was the wholesome approach to life that was imparted.

Marine consultant **Steve Foong** said, “The school was not only about formal education. It taught us how to be gentlemen and all-rounders. It taught us survival skills. The beauty of the school was that it taught us how to balance our time between study and play.”

Agreeing, co-founder of design firm Architects 61 **Tay Lee Soon** said, “It’s something that I have practised with my children. Even with my grandchildren today, I tell them there is a time to study and a time to play.

“To me, studying has to be tempered by sports. Thanks to the school, we learnt to play a variety of sports throughout the



Certificate of a prize awarded in 1916 for composition.

year. Every afternoon, in the first term, for instance, we would play cricket; in the second term it would be hockey and in the third term it was swimming. We were encouraged to be all-rounders. The school implanted in us the idea that study is not everything. It was also reinforced by my parents. My father, who was also from the school, was an all-China water polo player for whom sports was just as important as studies.

“Growing up like that, I brought up my children in a similar fashion.

“These extra-curricular activities (ECA) also helped to build character as well as bonds among the students.”

Added consultant medical oncologist and hematologist with Singapore Oncology Consultants at Farrer Park Medical Centre and Mt Alvernia Hospital **Tan Yew Oo**, “It was wonderful how the school made extra-curricular activities compulsory. After school, we all had to take part in some activity or other, whether it was athletics, a sport or joining an association like the Scouts. Even if you were not good at any of the games, at least you had a taste of it and could appreciate it when watching tournaments in any sport in later years.

“It also gave us an opportunity to get

For many, the same school field evoked a powerful sense of nostalgia. The size of four football fields, it was the hub of all sports and activities and the place where they played and bonded.



Football, one of the many sports offered in PFS (inset), being played in the magnificent school field (above) which is used for other sports as well.

to know one another and for juniors to get to know their seniors. By playing together we all bonded as one. I did scouting and enjoyed it — in fact that was where I made life-long friends.”

BUILDING LEADERSHIP THROUGH MENTORING

Most were of the opinion that the system of seniors mentoring juniors was perfect for nurturing leadership qualities.

Founder of Singapore’s first department of plastic surgery at SGH and now its senior consultant **Lee Seng Teik** elaborated, “The teachers led by example. They excelled in the classroom and led us in the sports field. They were competent in whatever activity they led.

“The range of activities offered was tremendous — there was art, music, painting, scouting, sports. We were given the opportunity to excel just by taking part.



Scout troop - scouting was one of many ECA activities of PFS.



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Consultant medical oncologist and hematologist
Singapore Oncology Consultants at Farrer Park Medical Centre
and Mt Alvernia Hospital

“We were grouped into separate Houses. And in each House juniors and seniors were grouped together with the seniors assuming the position of leadership. There was a spirit of friendly competition with different Houses competing with one another. In the process, there was the nurturing of leadership qualities and characteristics that would mould the man — competing fairly and helping others.

“We were encouraged to go for excellence in whatever we did in studies and in sports and in doing so we were inculcated with the qualities of tolerance and sportsmanship for all — irrespective of our backgrounds or ethnicity.”

All these qualities invariably prepared Old Frees for the outside world after leaving school and guided them in their careers.

Adding to the nurturing of leadership qualities through the seniors-mentoring-juniors structure was the school’s unique board of prefects system.

Established as far back as 1865, the Board of Prefects (BOP) was set up to confer on selected students the highest position of trust and responsibility. Eighteen students were appointed as prefects each year, based on their personality, leadership quality, contributions to the school and academic prowess.

Headed by a School Captain and a deputy, the prefects had complete autonomy, without any teacher’s supervision, to carry out their duties to ensure that discipline in the school was maintained, that events such as the weekly School Assembly were properly conducted, and to liaise between the school administration and the student body.

INSPIRING TEACHERS

Many Old Frees interviewed also spoke warmly of their teachers, how they



Former headmaster’s house adjacent to the school’s sports field.

influenced their lives, their sense of dedication, even their quirks and the pranks played on them — stories they would recall to gales of hearty laughter at their annual reunions.

As **Professor Lee Seng Teik** put it, “What shaped us? Our educators. We realised how wonderful our headmaster was when he came back long after he had retired to visit us. This was Hughes. He even brought with him the notes he had kept as headmaster — it was a diary and he would refer to it as we reminisced over events in the school. He would now and again say, ‘Ah, so that was you...’

“We also had very close bonding with our teachers.

“I remember **Ong Teong Guan**, our maths teacher, arriving in school daily on his faithful Vespa. There was **Tan Ah Fee**, the brother of Singapore’s first Asian judge **Tan Ah Tah**. Tan Ah Fee was a rugby coach and a great tennis player.

“Whenever we went back to Penang, long after we had left school, we would often pay our teachers a visit.”

Added **Dr Tan Yew Oo**, “We had some inspiring teachers, both locals and expatriates, who taught us in various disciplines from history and geography to science and literature. And because they were passionate in what they taught, they were able to motivate us.”

Elaborating **Dr Lee Eng Hin** said, “PFS had a great structure and processes that not only increased the students’ IQ (Intelligence Quotient) but also cultivated their EQ (Emotional Intelligence) as well. Through the structure of class monitor, traffic warden, prefect system and the ECA

mentoring system, students were given authority which helped in developing leadership qualities.”

As **Tay Lee Soon**, who represented not only the school in water polo but also played for Penang and Malaysia in international meets said, “I remember the time when we played water polo for our school and we had beaten our rivals, Chung Ling High School, by two goals. This was on a Sunday. On Monday, our headmaster Roper introduced us to the school as water polo champions. It made us feel very great to be recognised as sportsmen of the school.”

Old Frees also view PFS as truly special in other ways.

For the founding director of the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS), **Soo Khee Chee**, it was the “friendships forged among diverse races and development of intense loyalty to friends and school” that was PFS’ best trait. He elaborated, “This intense sense of belonging



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Lee Seng Teik

Professor of plastic surgery
Singapore General Hospital



Bonding in class.

came from a total immersion in our school culture not only in lessons but also in extra-curricular activities.”

He also recalls the school’s magical atmosphere enhanced by the beauty of the angkana trees whenever they blossomed. “They are located around the edge of the all-purpose school field and when they were in bloom, the flowers were a golden yellow and had a beautiful scent.”

For many, the same school field evoked a powerful sense of nostalgia. The size of four football fields, it was the hub of all sports and activities and the place where they played and bonded. So unsurprisingly it retains a special spot in the hearts of most Old Frees.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Founder of the Centre for Hand and Reconstructive MicroSurgery (CHARMS) and hand surgery specialist

Lim Beng Hai attributes his choice of profession to his science teachers who encouraged creativity and adopted a trusting ‘laissez-faire’ attitude that helped him and his classmates to blossom independently.

“I was in the school for only two years but I remember that when I first entered the Lower Sixth Form I was entrusted to conduct an experiment on the effects of MSG (monosodium glutamate) in the diets of chickens. We got to rear the chickens in bio-labs and fed them enormous amounts of MSG which ended up in them getting uric deposits. We won the Lim Chong Eu medal in the Penang State Maths and

Science Exhibition in 1976.

“In our Upper Sixth year, we were told to study the effects of Bernoulli’s principle on slow flowing rivers and how this could be converted to energy. This got us airtime on Radio Television Malaysia and second prize in a national science exhibition on renewable energy for the school in 1977.

“These projects stimulated an interest in research for me and the experiments we did made me realise that I was good at tinkering with my hands. That led to my interest in pursuing hand surgery.

“I have very good memories of my time in school as we had very stimulating teachers. The most influential teacher for me was **SH Tan**, who taught physics. He left a deep impression on not only me but also my older brother, who was also in Penang Free. Mr Tan always associated life with physics and was fond of saying ‘Life is a Sinusoidal curve; everything has its ups and downs.’

“Looking at our huge school field where we played rugby, he would say, ‘It looks green from afar but when you look closely it is not so green - life is like that. Friends are the same. Sometimes, when you get too close, you see their weaknesses so you have to step back just like when you step back to look at the field, you can appreciate the lush green again.’”

Agreeing **Steve Foong** said, “Our teachers taught us independence, they made us think by not holding our hand; they wanted us to take responsibility and made us work for something rather than forced us to do it.

“At one of our Scout car events we were tasked to build a car using junkyard materials. We were 13 years old then but learnt to use a welding rod and with our imagination fashion a car. We made it in a couple of months and even raced it in Scout grand prix events.

“We were also grateful for innovative



Frees in a celebratory mood.

teachers like **Mr Chng** our additional maths teacher. In the 1990s, when school textbooks were translated into Malay, in line with national policy, he taught us in English so that we would have a good grasp of the language as he knew this would serve us well in future.”

For many an Old Free, one name among teachers stood out for his love of poetry, which in turn inspired them to

develop an interest in poetry too. Said **Dr Lee Eng Hin**, “**Tan Boon Soon**, who taught us English, got me excited with poetry with his own love for the subject. He often recited verses from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* by heart in class.”

Said radiologist at Mount Elizabeth Hospital **Chin Wah Seng**, “For me, my physical education teacher **Teh Kheng Chooi** stood out. He was a great

badminton player and coach. It was because of him that I got heavily involved in badminton.”

Many badminton players under his charge were to go on to win the Thomas Cup for many years.

When it came to painting a portrait of an Old Free, all agree that it is encapsulated in the motto of the school: *Fortis Atque Fidelis* (Strength with Fidelity).

SENSE OF INTEGRITY AND FORTITUDE

Said **Dr Tan Yew Oo**, “We learnt to be diligent and be a person of integrity and that through hard work you can get to where you want. There are no short cuts in life. So the school helped to shape our character. Everything from discipline, honesty and the need to be strong as reflected in our school motto is imbibed in you.”

Elaborated **Betty Ooi Poh Gek**, “Our motto — to be strong and faithful —



“An Old Free is someone who is courageous, prepared to speak out against what is unfair and to stand up for the underdog. One has to strive for excellence and be strong and faithful as epitomised by the school motto.”

Yeoh Keat Chuan
Managing Director
Economic Development Board

best describes an Old Free. It means being strong in leadership, to have the courage to take on risks and seize opportunities. It is to be faithful to yourself, your beliefs, your family, school and community.”

Managing Director of Economic Development Board **Yeoh Keat Chuan** added, “An Old Free is someone who is courageous, prepared to speak out against what is unfair and to stand up for the underdog. One has to strive for excellence and be strong and faithful as epitomised by the school motto.”

“We were taught the importance of trust and integrity, qualities that have carried most of us through life,” added **Tay Lee Soon**.

The spirit of excellence in the face of competition was also encouraged. More important, say Old Frees, was the school’s emphasis on an all-round education and excellence in sports and games - not just in studies - and its fostering of camaraderie,

esprit de corps and sportsmanship.

Dr Peter Lim Ai Chi explained, “The school ingrained in us loyalty, camaraderie and self confidence. It laid the foundations of being resolute and the ability to be strong so that whatever comes, you can handle it.”

EQUALITY FOR ALL

The lack of discrimination was another trait of the school.

As architect **Heah Hock Heng** said, “All the various races got on well together.”

“We were multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious, that was why the school was called ‘free’,” said The Old Frees’ Association, Singapore Vice-President **Cheah Hock Leong**.

This reflected one of the original precepts of the school as spelt out in its charter: “That the School be opened to the reception of all children on the Island, of every description...”



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Cheah Hock Leong

Vice-President
The Old Frees’ Association, Singapore

Former director of the Technical Education Department at the Ministry of Education **Lim Ho Hup** said, “Because of its free thinking spirit, the school attracted top teachers. We had top English teachers, for instance, and that stood us in good stead career-wise. Many Free School boys were able to get into the professions.

“In fact, I think we had no competition from the other schools. Even

St Xavier’s Institution, our arch-rival, was no match for our school.”

Added **Heah Hock Heng**, “Our headmasters came from either Cambridge or Oxford and imparted in us the same kind of heritage these universities enjoyed. The school was under the colonial administration so it was run like the civil service.

“We were given a good grounding in education and in the use of English. We

School Rally Song

Music and lyrics written by GS Reutens, 1966

Chorus

Let us march unto fame
Let the aisles proclaim
Till our anthem will dare us to do
Let us onward to win and new laurels gain
Free School for the brave and the true!

Verses

It matter neither how strait the gate
Nor how charged with dangers the goal
Let the tempest rage and fell odds inflate
We'll do it with our heart and soul.

When duty calls be it school or state
We'll do it with God by our side
For the sons of Free School don't hesitate
Nor let cool their zeal and pride.

Let us all then join in this Jubilee
All with one loud voice to proclaim
Our true loyalty and our constancy
To our mater still remain.

were considered 'la crème de la crème'.

"But at the same time, we knew how to carry ourselves, to stand tall and were also taught to be gentlemanly."

With such nurturing traditions and the quality of education, it is little wonder that the school has produced men (and women) of distinction who have done well in their chosen professions.

The absence of bias also extended to other areas. All were treated equally, whatever their backgrounds. There were students who were chauffeur-driven to school while others took the bus, cycled or walked. Said **Tan Yew Oo**, "We all came from different backgrounds but we were able to gel and become friends all because of the way the school was run."

The late **Dr Lee Kum Tatt**, former chairman of the Singapore Institute of Standards and Industrial Research (SISIR) once wrote, "The School is great not because it is the oldest but that it is also the

“Once a Free, Always a Free.”

best and is Free — free from many of the social, economic, religious and racial issues which have bogged down many institutions and even governments throughout the world.

“The school instilled the right spirit in the students through its motto. Years after I left, the school’s rally song composed by a former PFS teacher (*see box in previous page*) which students sang every year on Founder’s Day and at special functions also helped to inspire and fire up the young minds to do many things which they might not have done otherwise.”

Since the 1920s when the Singapore judiciary was dominated, nay, run even, by men who were mostly Old Frees, so too Old Frees today are continuing the tradition of contributing to their adopted home through their varied professions — as doctors, educators, sports coaches...

Many have served in the public service and done Singapore and their alma

mater proud. Others have contributed to Singapore’s physical landscape through designing buildings that have become part of the Republic’s architectural scene.


Thanks to their PFS experience, they have been inspired to do good to others and to channel their talents and skills to try to better the lives of those around them.

They are also keen to give back to not only Singapore society but also to their hometowns as evidenced in the many collaborations in the field of medicine between Singapore hospitals and hospitals in Penang and other states in Malaysia.

As the Old Frees are fond of quoting, “Once a Free, Always a Free.” ■



School field with sports pavilion.

An aerial night photograph of Singapore, showing the illuminated city skyline across the water. In the foreground, the Marina Bay Sands hotel is visible, featuring its iconic three towers and a large, illuminated lotus-shaped structure. The water reflects the city lights, and several boats are visible in the bay. The sky is a deep blue, suggesting dusk or early evening.

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