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A loving 'mother' to 6,000 girls

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MILLICENT E. Sibert may not be a mother in the maternal sense but she has infused a sense of discipline to help chart the future of thousands of children. Under her care, some 6,000 young girls of St Nicholas Primary School in Alor Star have been "mothered" not only academically and with discipline but with such care and concern that the majority of her "children" hold her in high esteem and shower her with love - more than what a natural mother receives.

Some of whom she has nurtured are the Sultan of Kedah's daughter Tunku Intan, the Prime Minister's daughters Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir and Asiah Mahathir as well as former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's niece Tunku Sopia.

To name a few more - Mak Sooi Joo, whom she saw grow from a child to a teacher and later as headmistress of St Nicholas Convent Secondary School in Alor Star, lawyer Anita Sunderaj, and scores of other personalities.

They still look up to her for her "motherly" care and concern and often shower her with gifts while some never fail to send her Christmas cards.

"What else can I ask for? I have given them my utmost to make them what they are today," she said at her home in Western Gardens, Penang.

Widely noted for being strict, she was often referred to as Miss "Terror" Sibert and is now 72.

"I was groomed under the strict tutelage of the Infant Jesus Sisters of the Convent led by P.Woon before becoming a teacher and so I inherited the firmness which I fervently implemented not only in the pupils but also in the teachers and the administrative staff," she explained.

"It was to the extent that any complacent staff were told: You must be sent to Miss Sibert to shake you up."

"Just a pat from me and a glance at my size went a long way," she chuckled.

Yet, beneath her firm looks, big size and the reputation of "terror" lies a motherly heart and the touch of love she has always showered on others like any mother would. Being a popular music teacher also enabled her to express her love through her music lessons.

During her tenure as headmistress, several programmes for poor children were implemented. Noting that some poor children came to school without proper breakfast, milk and fried beehoon were supplied for their nourishment.

A sick bay was set up in the school with teachers trained in first-aid taking charge of sick pupils.

"We took pains to find out the weaknesses of the pupils and help overcome them ... if poverty is the obstacle, some of us even had to contribute with our own money," said Sibert, adding that she was against pupils taking tuition as the teachers were reprimanded for pupils' poor performance, if any.

"But all these must be tempered with strictness and discipline ... and with no compromise," she emphasised with noticeable firmness in her eyes.

Holding fervently onto this principle, she was noted for her strictness not only within the precincts of St Nicholas but also in other schools, says S.P. Annamalai, an ex-student of St Michael's Secondary School in Alor Star and now a practising lawyer in Penang.

"Besides the academic syllabus, sports and religious classes both for Muslims and non-Muslims, the cleanliness of the compound and that of the

tuckshop was strictly maintained," said Sibert.

"We even organised mass drills for inter-school sport events in the stadium in the early 70s," she said.

But she does not claim credit solely for herself. "I attribute all these to the members of the school board, parent-teacher association and my former colleagues."

Nevertheless, her services were recognised when she was bestowed the Pingat Cemerlang Kedah by the Sultan in 1977.

Sibert was born in 1928 in Bentong, Pahang where her father Hans Ernest Sibert worked as a health inspector.

She began as a temporary teacher in 1948 at St Nicholas Primary School where she underwent training under the Infant Jesus Sisters of the Convent.

Sibert became a full-fledged teacher in 1953 and rose to become headmistress of the same school until her retirement in 1983.

The New Straits Times of July 4, 1983 carried a caption, describing her retirement send-off as:

"Miss Sibert was given a grand send-off in a beautifully decorated trisha - towed by Girl Guides, amid shouts of 'Goodbye' from her pupils."

Among those who attended a thanksgiving mass held at the school's chapel on her retirement was then Bishop Soter Fernandez.

Despite failing eyesight due to diabetes, Sibert now leads a well-earned life of peace and quiet with her long-time faithful domestic helper and companion Philomene Ch'ng, 64.

Occasional calls and visits from her former pupils serve to enliven Sibert and induce a bout of reminiscence.

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