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Bringing back golden era of education

By Kalimullah Hassan

I WALKED down memory lane on Friday, past the big angšana trees, along the now dirty river and the once majestic Suffolk House, among the still multi-racial student population of young hopefuls with dreams of bright futures and an enthusiastic principal who wants to lead Penang's Methodist Boys' School back to glory.

Memory lane is in Air Itam Road.

The first sign of changing times was the barrier drawn across the entrance to the school. An old guard looks into the car, scrutinising the occupants.

In these times, you cannot be too careful.

The principal's room is small and it is occupied by Khor Hong Yin, an old boy of the school.

Funny how when we were kids the office and the principal both looked so big and awesome.

Hong Yin, though, does not seem as foreboding as our Dr Cheah Bian Kung of the 1970s, who, in his antique motorboat-shaped car, was Zeus to us mere mortals.

In fact, Hong Yin looks so much younger, perhaps indicating that Penang life, or maybe teaching, is less stressful than journalism or business.

He talks like how the older folk talk, about the "good old days" when we used to laugh all the time; when race or religion was never much of an issue; when we used to walk, cycle or bus to rival schools like Penang Free and the Saints to cheer our football and tennis teams and have that childish taunting and the occasional shoving and shouting match.

Hong Yin is now principal of the school and his teachers include quite a few old boys and girls. He and loyal assistant Gim Ewe note that the same camaraderie is not so prevalent these days.

But they want to change things.

Together with old Mr Lim Cheng Chuan, who has been on the board of governors for as long as anyone can remember, they want to bring back the pride of old, the team spirit that knitted our young souls together.

They want to revive what they see as a flagging spirit of "Malaysia Boleh".

Much as Malaysia Boleh, coined by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a rallying cry towards excellence, has been ridiculed by failed spirits and malcontents, Hong Yin's and his team's almost religious belief in it seems refreshing and encouraging.

Maybe it's because of the school song, which they still sing with fervour and zest:

Come and sing a rousing song
Tap your feet as you go along
Sing of MBS Penang
Sing of MBS Penang
Pykett came to blaze the trail
There's no room for hearts that quail
Learn then there can be no rest
Till you've given of your best.

(Pykett was the founder of the school.)

Cynics refer, derogatorily, to Malaysia as "Bolehland".

But it was that spirit of "Boleh" that spurred many of our young. Much as we in MBS disliked the "Frees" from Penang Free School, we also envied

them for their spirit of togetherness which led them to excellence year in year out, be it on the field or in class.

It is that spirit of "Boleh" that Hong Yin seeks to revive.

Earlier this year, the school organised a fund-raising dinner to restore and build more classrooms. The response from old boys was very encouraging.

Heartened, the school is now inviting old boys back, to give talks to students and staff, to tell their real life stories of struggle and success.

The two people invited that Friday were Chew Why Hoong, my classmate and very good friend, and I.

Why Hoong went to teacher's college after school but left the profession some years later to become a contractor. He struggled and went bust twice but true to his honesty and grit, repaid every single sen he owed.

He never gave up and in the last seven years, rebuilt his business to become a very low-key but very successful developer, specialising in reviving projects abandoned by more renowned and well-known businessmen.

Neither Why Hoong nor I ever made it to university because our families were not rich, we did not get the best results and because we were growing up at a time when our nation was young and there were not enough scholarships or universities to go around.

And that was one of the main reasons, we found out, that Hong Yin invited us, to showcase to the students that while studies are very important to give them a foundation for the future, the paper chase was not the ultimate game in life.

Children must learn from the text books but life is also about having fun, being happy, making friends.

The last two stanzas of the school song go thus:

MBS, MBS

For you a name for us a flame

Shining steadily and lustily

To show us life's a game

MBS, MBS

O come what may we vow to play

Life's great game with courage and spirit gay

MBS ...MBS!

Funny how these little details are edged out of our lives as we grow older and get too involved in the rat race.

As we listened to the teachers speak, we realised how much Malaysia has changed in so many ways. Education is free and available to every child.

The facilities are so much better. They now have counsellors and career guidance and so much more.

In our time, and it was only 30-odd years ago, despite free education, we had to buy our own text and reference books and pay a monthly school fee of RM7.50, a princely sum for the poor.

One day, it was the 28th of the month, I remember, my teacher, exasperated because he could not close his accounts, sent me home until I could come back and pay that month's fees.

Today, that will not happen to a poor man's kid.

In the hall where we used to hear the principal give his talks, we sat and watched a Powerpoint show of the school's history.

MBS has its share of very successful old boys.

There is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Home Affairs Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid, badminton great Tan Aik Huang, an All-England and Thomas Cup champion, and his brother Aik Mong who was a Thomas Cupper, Davis Cup's Kuldeep Singh, Tokoh Guru Abdullah Ariff, financier Vaseehar Hassan, doctor and gentleman

politician Tan Sri Sak Cheng Lum and ASLI's Datuk Michael Yeoh.

There are many more.

The principal and teaching staff are zealously working to get the old boys, many of whom are successful, to help revive old glory.

The teachers are infusing the spirit of Malaysia into the students; infusing a belief that there is more to life than just chasing that pot of gold.

One of our regrets is that work on restoring Suffolk House, which is within the school compound and was the residence of Penang founder Sir Francis Light, has been so desultory and hampered because of lack of funds although it has been talked about for more than 30 years.

It took Hongkong and Shanghai Bank to kickstart the RM5 million restoration with a substantial grant but even then, the snail's pace at which the Penang authorities seem to move has resulted in very little progress.

Hopefully, old boy Koh Tsu Koon will eventually move to hasten progress.

Suffolk House and its glory aside, this country was built on schools like Penang Free, MBS, St Xavier's, Bukit Bintang Girls' School, Victoria Institution, Anderson, King George's, English College, Sultan Abdul Hamid College and many others.

These schools had the discipline, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious make-up, dedicated teachers and top class education system to groom generations of well-grounded and educated young Malaysians.

Abdullah and Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein have promised to make national-type schools the school of choice for Malaysians.

That is the only way for us to go as a country, for all our children to attend one type of school where they can get a sound education and learn to live life the way it should be lived in a society like ours.

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