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Proud to be Johannian

By Umah Papachan

IT is the school's centennial year and Johannians are excited. UMAH PAPACHAN catches up with some distinguished former students of St John's Institution.

THE motto of St John's Institution says it all. Fide et Labore means faith and zeal, and this is what the school is all about, moulding all those countless thousands of students that have passed through its doors since it first opened in 1904.

Every Johannian has his thing to tell about St John's, how the school had in some way helped him along, and how he developed into a distinguished son of Malaysia, or became rich, famous or simply became a responsible citizen.

As Professor Datuk Ismail Md Salleh recalls: "St John's instills moral values into the boys."

The professor should know only too well, for he and Martha Ho were two very special students. They were the first two blind students to have enrolled in a normal school and that was in 1968.

"St John's efforts to integrate the first two blind students into a normal school was amazing," remembers Ismail, who today is the vice-chancellor of the International University College of Technology Twintech, Kuala Lumpur.

"The whole affair was very well organised and this can be attributed to the fact that it's a missionary school, the volunteers who helped us had a great duty of selflessness and a moral duty to help those that were less able than them.

"They were kind and charitable simply because St John's instilled these moral values into the boys."

The Ismail story did not just start in St John's or in the colourful and satisfying route that he took to where he is today.

"I was raised in Kelantan in a family of nine children," said Ismail, 57. "It was my late father who wanted me to go to this blind school despite strong objections from the kampung folk.

"In 1954, my father attended a handicraft exhibition in my hometown called Salor, near Pasir Mas and learnt about this blind school in Johor. My father walked all the way to Johor Baru to find out about it and it's because of him I became who I am because he had the courage to do what is right.

"He sent me to the Princess Elizabeth School in Johor Baru, a residential school for the blind. I was there till I was 13."

In 1963, he went to Sultan Ismail College in Kota Baru which had an integrated programme for the blind.

"I was there till Form Five. In 1967, I took my Senior Cambridge (as the Form Five exam was called then) and I was in the batch that was lucky enough to have the chance to further our education in Form Six. The batch before me couldn't.

"Before I sat for my Senior Cambridge, I had a wonderful teacher, Raymond Hall, an Irishman brought to Kelantan by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to assist blind students in rural areas.

"He started a small hostel and coached us in English and also discussed my future. He wrote to the chief education officer, Tun Hamdan Tahir, and in several correspondences suggested that the blind should be given the opportunity to further their education to Form Six and even to tertiary

level.

"Tun Hamdan arranged the first integrated education programme for the blind at St John's Institution.

"When I passed my Senior Cambridge with distinctions, I was admitted to St John's in 1968 with Martha and spent two years doing Form Six. We were part of the first integrated programme for the blind.

"St John's had a resource room specially for the blind and we had three resource teachers to help us cope with our school work.

"They were Brother Senen, an Irishman, Terence de Cruz, and Sulaiman Wahap.

"My subjects were Art, Economics, History, Bahasa Malaysia, and Malay and English Literature, and General Paper.

"Back then, books in Braille were really limited but with the help of the resource teachers and a core of student volunteers, who read to us and help take notes, I coped despite my disability.

Ismail was made to feel like one of the boys, joining his classmates in extra curricular activities.

"I was active in debating and oratory competitions, and going for movies, yes movies, dinner parties and other outings. They didn't treat me like a blind person to be pitied."

"My teachers were a dedicated lot. They counselled me, became my friend and adviser and helped with everything so that my two years were really memorable.

Ismail got his Higher School Certificate (HSC) and joined University of Malaya in 1970.

"Later they sent me to the United States to finish my degree in economics and political science at the State University of New York in Albany, and I was the first blind Malaysian to attend university abroad."

Ismail recalls that the help from voluntary organisations and the teaching staff was fantastic. and the facilities at the university were "absolutely amazing".

"The facilities for the blind at the State University were absolutely amazing.

"They had voluntary organisations, produced reading materials in Braille and they would send me tapes and other reading materials on subjects that I was doing.

"I was the only blind person and for three years, I didn't face any discrimination."

Ismail graduated in 1974 and did his Masters and PhD at the University of Illinois.

Ismail returned home in 1977 and joined Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

He later joined the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, the country's think tank, where he was part of the team that prepared a paper 'The Way Forward' which became the Vision 2020 Malaysia under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was then the Prime Minister.

Then he teamed up with an old classmate of his from Kelantan, Tan Sri Wan Azmi Wan Hamzah, to establish TwinTech.

"I consider myself blessed and very fortunate despite my disability.

But I owe my blessed success to many people who had faith in allowing a blind person to lead the way in leadership by example.

"Right from my school experiences to my first integration with sighted students at St John's. The teachers, students and the atmosphere at St John's were enriching experience."

Another Johannian who remembers his days in St John's is David Mizan Hashim, the principal architect of Veritas Architects, Kuala Lumpur, who studied in St John's from 1973-1979.

But it was not an ideal start in St John's for Mizan.

"I'm of Malay-American parentage and studied in a private primary school where the students were mostly children of expatriates."

His parents decided that he should study in a government secondary school and "I was thrown into a multi-racial school and of course I stood out like a thorn among the roses".

"I was bullied. The boys would call me celup, rojak, etc. It was a tough adjustment for me as the boys were really naughty but I took it all in my stride. Looking back, it was an enriching experience to mix with boys from all walks of life.

"I had a burning ambition to be an architect since I was eight and Mr Poon, my Maths and Physics teacher, took a lot of interest in me. He knew I had the passion for both these subjects and took the time to give me the extra attention."

Passing the Malaysian Certificate Education (MCE) with flying colours, he was accepted into Harvard University in 1978 and did his undergraduate in BA in Architecture followed by a Master's.

"In my first year at Harvard, I discovered that my secondary education at St John's was superior to that of any American high school graduate and I was allowed to skip half a semester of Additional Maths and Physics.

"I was really proud of St John's commitment to excellence."

Azlan Abdullah, the director and CEO of Mycron Steel Bhd, who studied in St John's from 1972-1976, recalls:

"St John's moulded my character, boosted my confidence gave me discipline and commitment to excel.

"We had our late headmaster, Brother Joseph Yeoh, to thank. He was a no-nonsense and strict disciplinarian."

St John's, he said, is a school that believes that sports make a man.

"And I was no exception, I excelled and loved sports. I was active in the Cadet Corps and represented the school and the state in tennis, sepak takraw and volleyball.

"We had two very dedicated sports masters, David and Vincent Fernandez, both of a rare breed of teachers who were dedicated and always encouraged the boys to do well in sports.

"St John's built its reputation on being the best in sports and continues to do so today," he said.

Azlan went on to further his studies in the United States, doing his BA in Business Administration in Texas and MBA in Finance in Kentucky.

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