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St Mary's centennial brings old girls together

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KUALA LUMPUR: It was a memorable day for about 100 former students of SMK St Mary here when they attended its centennial celebrations yesterday.

They may not have worn their trademark convent ink-blue pinafores or have pigtails but they were as excited as schoolgirls — chatting away, taking photographs amid loud greetings, hugs, giggles and tears. Many had not met since they left school, some more than 30 or 40 years ago.

One of the ex-students who attended the gathering at the school grounds in Selayang was Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, the wife of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who described her student days as being "idyllic" and "memorable".

"Although I come from a conservative family, my father realised the value of an English education. And despite the common misgivings among the Malays then about sending children to English missionary schools, I was enrolled in St Mary's from 1934 to 1941.

"The students were always encouraged to explore and develop their creativity and leadership skills out of the classroom.

"That played a vital role in molding the future generation of women in Malaysia," she said, recalling that there were not more than 10 Malay students in the school during her seven years there.

While at the school, she discovered the library and fell in love with reading, "which opened a whole new world for me".

"It also helped spur my desire to write," she said, adding that her initial ambition was to be a journalist.

Earlier, while launching the celebrations in the school hall, Dr Siti Hasmah paid tribute to her former teachers who had guided her during her years in the school.

"My teachers were prim and proper women as well as loving and caring. They were totally dedicated to their calling as educators. I owe them a debt of gratitude."

She said lessons were taught in English and she often had a good mix of students of different races and religious backgrounds.

"The school has been built on a strong foundation of love, care and concern for the people," she said.

St Mary's was opened in 1912 at Jalan Weld here and was managed by the Anglican Church of Singapore and Malaysia before St Mary's Church took over its administration five years later.

In 1998, the school moved to its new grounds and modern buildings at Taman Intan Baiduri in Selayang.

Former teacher, Noreen Kannabhiran, 70, said there was a lot of warmth among the staff and students.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali (second from left) being briefed on the heritage room by St Mary's headmistress Goh Hai Bee (left) yesterday. — NST picture by Mustafa Kamal

"I was a teacher here for 13 years and taught Home Science, Mathematics and English."

She decided to attend the celebrations as she wanted to meet her former colleagues whom she had not seen since leaving the school in 1989.

Another ex-student, Janice Monteiro-Lewis, 41, said she was happy to meet her former schoolmates.

"From the way many spoke of the alma mater, I am happy that the school traditions and values are still followed. The way they spoke and carried themselves were testaments to their education here."

The former students also visited the St Mary's heritage room, which carries the theme "Memoirs" and is a re-enactment of a typical classroom at the school's old building at Jalan

Weld, now renamed Jalan Tengah.

The room was set up using salvaged materials such as timber floor boards, doors, windows, as well as study desks and chairs.

It has six vintage suitcases, highlighting the collection of activities and experiences of pupils, teachers and principals who have served in both the old and the new school building.