

Back to the Golden Past

Most memories are nostalgic. Memories create images that are both faint and vivid. Almost everything about St. Paul's is etched in my memory for good, because – I may be pardoned for being self-indulgent – I have walked through the gates of St. Paul's for no less than 53 years, from 1943 to 1996 as a student and as a teacher.

I still remember our beloved founder, the red-faced Rev. Fr. M. J. Le Goc, whose visits to the school in the mornings were eagerly looked forward to, because he rarely failed to bring with him dried peaches for us, the giggling little girls. Mrs. Pearl Gunewardene whom we called “big teacher” was our first Principal. On a personal note. I shall always remember with gratitude my first teachers, Mrs. E. Gunsekera, Mrs. Peter Perera, Mrs. Florence Seneviratne and Srs. Celeste, Therese, Anne, Marie and the Principals Srs. Mary Joseph, Syncletica, Anne, Marie, Annette, Antonita, Brenda and Nirmalee.

Around 1946 there were about 850 students and they belonged to two Houses, “Green” and “Gold”. With the increase in the intake of students this was increased to four viz., “Red”, “Blue”, “Pink” and “Mauve” with “Green” and “Gold” Houses ceasing to exist. Until the early 1960s St. Paul's remained a mixed school. 1961 saw the formation of the Past Pupils' Association (PPA) with Miss Joy Francke and Mrs. Constance Moses as the first President and Secretary respectively. The PPA in its early years was fortunate to have some very active members like Annette Gunsekera, Naomi Visser and Gwen La Faber.

St. Paul's had its most turbulent period during the schools takeover. The protest against the takeover was enthusiastically led Rev. Fr. Vincent Dep, the Parish Priest of Kelaniya. Fr. Vincent was able to muster even the support of Buddhists in the area like Messrs. Sirisoma Ranasinghe and Herbert Algama. Strongly behind Fr. Vincent were the Catholics of Waragoda led by the Candappa and Fernandopulle families, Messrs. Calixtus Seneviratne, Vincent Silva, Eric Abeysinghe, Francis Balasingham, Sebastian Fernando, Mrs. Consy de Alwis, Mrs. Hazel de Alwis and my parents Mr. and Mrs. Valentine de Silva. After the takeover St. Paul's Girls' English School was renamed St. Paul's Balika Maha Vidyalaya. From almost the very beginning St. Paul's has remained under the able guidance of the Apostolic Carmel nuns. St. Paul's has been extremely fortunate to have had able educationists of the calibre of Srs. Mary Joseph, Syncletica, Anne, Annette, Antonita and Brenda. Sr. Brenda left no stone unturned to see that the Golden Jubilee of the school in 1985 was an event to

remember. On her retirement her shoes were ably filled by her pupil the ever-smiling Sr. Nirmalee Fernando who held the rudder for 19 long years.

Extra-curricular activities during our school days were varied. On the spiritual side there were various devotional exercises for all the girls from the upper to the lower grades. On the first Friday of every month Rev. Fr. J. B. Gregory conducted Sacred Heart devotions for the upper school students while Mrs. Constance and Bertha Don Paul conducted devotions to the Blessed Virgin every month. Sr. Joyce and Mrs. Grace Silva conducted Holy Childhood devotions for girls from Standards one to five. Hence it is not surprising that St. Paul's became a fertile ground for religious vocations during this period.

It must also be mentioned that St. Paul's maintained a very high standard of English as all classes were conducted in English. English as a subject was ably handled by Srs. Gwendoline, Anne, Marie, Bertha and Annette and lay teachers like Mrs. Greeta Fernando, Mrs. Claribel Basnayake and Geraldine de Silva who were extremely fluent in their English. Scenes from Shakespearean plays were enacted by a host of enthusiastic pupils. Bernadette Pulle and Jeanette George are two "actresses" I simply cannot forget.

On the eve of its 75th anniversary this great institution has been placed under the care of the young, yet able and energetic Sr. Siyani. The good wishes and prayers of everyone who has the welfare of St. Paul's at heart will be with her to carry on the excellent work of her predecessors. The present members of the staff and the pupils have my good wishes to live up to the school's motto, "Facientes Veritatem in Caritate" (Working in Truth and Love).

St. Paul's is a part of me. I have been fortunate to be a member of the teaching staff when the school celebrated its 25th, 50th and 60th anniversaries. God has been gracious enough to let me participate in the 75th anniversary too. Whenever I go past the gates of St. Paul's and see the romping girls in their white uniforms and the precious green and gold tie I feel that I am among them with my friends, Dulcie Wickremasinghe, Celine Jayasekera, Marian Ranasinghe, Octavia Gunetilleke, Nalini Weerasekera, Malathi Nakkawita, Thelma Pathiville and a host of others. Oh! Those were the days. I will remain a part of St. Paul's forever.

Rita de Silva - Past Pupil and Teacher