

Celebrating the inspiring life of Sister Deirdre O’Loan



Mission in Malaya as an Educator

Sister Deirdre arrived in the then Malaya in 1959 at 27 and later taught at the Bukit Nanas Convent in Kuala Lumpur.

A community of 30 sisters of different nationalities - Burmese, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian - welcomed her. The Superior was an Irish Sister, Sr Francis Xavier, a very good educator.

Bukit Nanas Convent offered classes from Standard 1 to 6, and 5 years in Secondary School. The school was big with more than 1000 pupils. Sister Deirdre taught English, Literature and Bible Studies. The highest standard was the O levels.

At the end of 1960, the school managed to get approval to start the A levels and Sister Deirdre pioneered the A level classes.



Photo 1 with her ‘O’ level students in CHIJ Bukit Nanas, Kuala Lumpur, Photo 2 & 3 with her ‘A’ level students, Photo 4 at her desk in the library

One of her first students gives a first-hand account of her mission there.

“In 1959, Sister Deirdre arrived in Kuala Lumpur – it must have been a daunting and difficult trip for her, to leave behind the safety and familiarity of her Ireland, to come East to a country that only 2 years earlier had achieved independence from Britain. Perhaps the fact that her new home would be a convent assured her somewhat. The convent that became her Malaysian home was our school, the Bukit Nanas Convent of Kuala Lumpur. It sat atop the “pineapple hill” so named because there was said to have been planted a large ring of pineapples to protect the garrison serving Rajah Abdullah. The convent was a short walk from the brother school of St John’s Institution and the new St John’s Cathedral that had been built 4 years earlier.

Our convent was a spacious, serene place, filled with countless nooks and corners as well as stretches of off-limit intriguing areas, possessing a quiet and calm dignity common to all convents; it would attempt to process generations of schoolgirls, and turn them into young ladies endowed with the prized education, so coveted by their parents. The girls either studied as day students or were out of towners who boarded at the school.

Soon after arriving, Sister Deirdre started teaching the Fourth Form in English, Literature and Scripture. Bee Ling remembers Sister D teaching an additional subject, Latin, to 5 girls after school hours. We were her pioneer group of students. On the first day that she appeared, she was dressed in her all-white nun’s habit, with a pointed coif and a long-sleeved heavy floor-length gown that must have caused her to melt continually; yet she seemed cool, with nary a drop of perspiration (in those days we were regularly reminded by the Reverend Mother i.e. Principal, that ladies perspired and only horses sweated). We saw with relief, a slim, apple-cheeked, fresh-looking, good-looking nun, smiling at us with Irish eyes and mouth, and speaking with a musical accent that we took a bit of time to get used to. She introduced herself as Sister Fergus (her name then). This was no dragon, we thought.

From the start however, we discovered that beneath that smiling exterior lurked hidden steel. Sister D had high expectations of us and said so, leaving little room for doubt. We, who had been on cruise control, and had been getting by with regurgitation of facts, suddenly had to expound original ideas and opinions in our essays and oral sessions with her. She brooked no laziness, could quell any rebelliousness with a look and some choice comments, like telling us that although we all had common sense, it was rather uncommon at times in us, or that the crème de la crème was showing signs of curdling. In turn, the braver among us sparred with her and one of us by the name of Mary, who had a good insight into Sister D, rattled her with a well planted dead cockroach on her table, or by telling her there was a rat at her foot.

Our stretching had started and so it continued throughout our time with her. Because she challenged us consistently, and expected so much of us, we felt we had to rise to the occasion and meet her standards, as we could not possibly disappoint her.

As one of the best educators we had (we used the more old fashioned term ‘teacher’ in those days), Sister D knew each of us well - our strengths, our faults, our weaknesses and constantly guided us. She boosted our self-esteem and made us believe in ourselves because she never harboured any doubts about us. She was confident we would turn out principled, moral and ethical, but not necessarily with a stiff upper lip in the process, as she was too Irish for that. The lessons we learned from her have been our guiding principles in life and remained so all these years.

After graduation, we each went our own way, and looked back occasionally, nostalgically, and said in effect that those were the days. About 2 decades later, we reconnected in Singapore and fortunately found Sister D again. We became friends for life and she followed our journey, through our marriages, births, children's marriages, arrival of grandchildren, in sickness and in health, comforted us when we were down and celebrated with us when we were happy.

About 2500 years ago, Confucius said of a teacher that he should study tirelessly and teach enthusiastically (xue er bu yan, hui ren bu juan 学而不厌, 诲人不倦) - Did he ever imagine he would describe so aptly an Irish nun and teacher?

Rest in peace Sister D – we will really miss you

Dr Kok Lee Peng and the Pioneer group of students from CHIJ Bukit Nanas, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Photos 1 & 2 at the CHIJ Bt Nanas anniversary celebration in KL, Photo 3 with a few of her pioneer students

Sister Deirdre recalled with fond memories, her time as a teacher starting the A level course in the Bukit Nanas Convent and her outings in Cameron Highlands and Port Dickson with her students.

The May 13 1969 riots in Malaysia left a deep impact on Sister Deirdre. She served in the Red Cross as a volunteer, taking care of patients and helping in the camp kitchen.

Two lessons remained with Sister Deirdre: 1) You do not know where danger could lurk and 2) The terrible power of rumours which can trigger alarming behaviour. She became very appreciative of sensitivities that could arise because of racial differences and realised the importance of racial harmony.

With the new policy of Malaysianization, ten years is the maximum time given to foreign missionaries to work within the country. She was sad to leave Malaysia.

At that time, the Archbishop was looking for religious Sisters and Brothers of the teaching orders to take up teaching positions in Catholic Junior College (CJC) in Singapore. Mother Anne Tan, the then Provincial invited Sister Deirdre to consider working in CJC which was in the process of starting.

Sister was offered a Sabbatical and she took the opportunity to further her knowledge in Library and Information Science at the University of London. She was appreciative of the many opportunities of being attached to a few University and Public Libraries and be allowed to attend Planning and Management meetings as an observer. She got tremendous insights into the role of university libraries working in collaboration with lecturers and offering research resources. Sister felt that that experience prepared her for her future work at the Junior College, and her reflection of the difficulties in meeting schedules for assignments made her more understanding towards her students in this area.