

# Celebrating the inspiring life of Sister Deirdre O’Loan



## Sister’s Reflection on her life in the East and her role as Educator



*Sister Deirdre accepted the invitation to be a citizen of Singapore on 23 May 1994.*

## Sister’s Reflections

---

Singapore is now home for Sister Deirdre. ‘I will always remain Irish,’ she says, ‘but I have put down roots here and I have wonderful friends. Singapore adopted me rather than I adopted Singapore.’ And what does Ireland think of her sons and daughters who have contributed so much in foreign lands? For many Irish it means an instant connection wherever they go in the world. Even today Sister Deirdre, now in her early-80s, helps new arrivals settle in to Singapore, people she doesn’t know but who are referred to her through friends and relatives in Ireland.

According to the great Irish writer George Bernard Shaw, ‘Progress is impossible without change.’ Change and progress go hand-in-hand as far as Sister Deirdre was concerned. Innovations in Singapore’s education during the 50 years since 1965 include the setting up of Junior Colleges. Sister Deirdre came to Singapore to teach at Catholic Junior College (CJC), having spent more than a decade at Bukit Nanas Convent in Kuala Lumpur.

---

In 1994 she retired as principal of CJC and took up her present role as supervisor of the 11 CHIJ schools in Singapore. The first formal CHIJ Board of Management was set up in 1975, chaired by Dr Ee Peng Liang. Since then an IJ Sister has been supervisor, providing support and encouragement, guidance and advice both to the board and to the CHIJ schools.

Twenty years on, and 56 years after she first left Ireland, Sister Deirdre has overseen the introduction of new ideas and improvements, including the rebuilding of all the CHIJ schools. She continues to be extremely interested in the development of education in Singapore. Her regular school visits mean she is up to date with their latest news, projects and events. 'Each school is similar in ethos but distinctive thanks to the history that has shaped it.' Though no longer in the classroom, Sister Deirdre is familiar to CHIJ girls through her visits, writing for school newsletters and yearbooks, as well as giving speeches on special occasions.

In describing her role, Sister Deirdre speaks of fidelity to the original vision of the IJ Sisters, the traditions of the CHIJ schools and re-interpreting these for the needs of education today. 'I am enthusiastic about changes and developments in Singapore's education. The system has been transformed with multiple pathways and possibilities,' she says. Being open to transformation, looking for new ideas, new approaches and methodologies in teaching, without losing sight of the IJ legacy and essential vision, are among the reasons why the CHIJ schools have survived and continue to thrive for over a century-and-a-half. Preparing for the future is something that Sister Deirdre embraces. For the past few years a number of the management tasks connected with the supervisor's role have been shared with a lay person, while she keeps a watching brief on the important thrust of ongoing formation. 'As a retiree I am well placed to do the work, so long as I have the mental powers and enthusiasm.'

*Rosemary Lim: "Irish Connections – Ireland's Intrepid Educationalists in Singapore" in 50 years of Singapore-Europe Relations*

---

## **Mission in Singapore as Supervisor of CHIJ Schools**

---

Upon her retirement, Sister D was appointed the Supervisor of the eleven IJ Schools in 1994.

Sister D always placed the schools, children, Principals, Teachers and all others before herself. Her primary focus throughout her time on the IJ Board of Management of some 22 years, was the education, welfare and holistic well-being of every child, Teacher, Staff and Principal in each one of our schools.



Sister being congratulated by the Prime Minister of Singapore

---

---

The President of Singapore awarded Sister D the Public Service Star in the National Day Awards in 2014 in recognition of her contribution to education.

The IJ Board had on that occasion recorded the following:

- (a) the CHIJ Board of Management (IJ Board) records and conveys the Board's heartiest congratulations to Sister Deirdre on the award of the Public Service Star (by the President) to her for her distinguished and immense contributions to the IJ Board, the IJ Sisters and all the thousands of girls who have benefitted from our 11 CHIJ schools;
- (b) the IJ Board also records and conveys our deepest appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to Sister Deirdre for her total dedication and sterling contributions to the IJ community and the education landscape of Singapore;
- (c) Sister Deirdre's immense and excellent contributions have clearly facilitated the work and ethos of the IJ Board, the IJ Secretariat, the Principals, Teachers, staff and all our schools and the whole community;
- (d) Sister Deirdre has, in her many years as a critical member of the IJ community, selflessly given her all, and life, in the work of our IJ Schools, IJ community and Singapore; and
- (e) we are all confident that Sister Deirdre will continue her excellent service to the IJ community and Singapore for many more years and we sincerely applaud and thank Sister Deirdre.

Sister D continued to undertake and perform with passion her critical role as the Supervisor, and a mentor to all of us, during her illness and until her final days. She went home to be with the Lord, at the age of 83 on 13 Aug 2016 at 7.43 am, at the IJ Convent at Chestnut Drive, surrounded by her beloved IJ Sisters and close friends.

We on the IJ Board had deliberated the wordings for Sister D's obituary. Our intention was to endeavour to adequately but succinctly describe our gratitude and loss. The wordings were in the following terms:

*"The Infant Jesus Board of Management  
deeply mourns the passing of our beloved  
Sister Deirdre O'Loan  
Supervisor of the IJ Schools  
on 13 August 2016*

*We, and the whole IJ community of Sisters, Principals, Teachers, Staff and Students, past and present, of all our schools will always remember her and honour her legacy.*

*We are deeply grateful for her dedication, love and steadfast service over the past 57 years to the education and well-being of our children and community."*

Vivienne Lim, Chairperson of the IJ Board of Management (IJBoard), stated the following in the media and I quote:

*"Sister Deirdre was a well-loved educator who embodied the CHIJ motto of being:  
'Simple in Virtue, Steadfast in Duty',  
working tirelessly for others till the very end."*

*She saw what was unique in each child, and gave of herself to all around her. From students in the schools, to the custodians, carpark attendant, she would always make time to stop and share a kind word with them."*

All of us on the Board certainly identify and agree wholeheartedly with Vivienne's sentiments.

---

Karen Tay, Principal, CHIJ Secondary, Toa Payoh, was quoted in the media of having stated, inter alia, the following:

*“... Sister Deirdre regularly attended school events and actively gave Principals of the CHIJ schools a lot of support and direction to uphold the mission and motto of the schools. We have gained a lot from her generosity of spirit and wisdom. She has a calmness about her that gives us a sense of peace when we do our work. She has always had a listening ear for everyone.”*

Karen’s observation of Sister D’s generosity of spirit and wisdom, and the calmness about her giving the rest of us a sense of peace, is another facet of Sister D that resonates with us all.

Sister D’s wake was held, according to her wishes, at the IJ Convent at 4A Chestnut Drive where she resided and was animator of the IJ community there.

All of us were witnesses to the multitudes of people who attended the wake, the nightly Mass and prayers, and who shared wonderful and touching memories of Sister D. The mourners included people from all walks of life who had been touched by Sister D’s life and work as a Nun, Teacher, Principal, the Supervisor of our IJ schools, a mentor and as a steadfast daughter of Christ.

The arrangements for Sister D’s wake and the funeral on Wed 17 Aug 2016 involved the girls, Teachers, Staff and Principals from all our 11 schools, the IJ Board, the IJ Homes, all the IJ Sisters, friends and the whole IJ community.

The final send off, attended by Sister D’s siblings, namely Ann, Pat, Fergus and brother-in-law Pascal Buckley and niece Pat Buckley, was beautiful, dignified and befitting, totally for a lady of steel, and grace, and of God. The 11 Priests and 3 deacons who joined Friar Michael D’Cruz who celebrated the Mass is testament to the extent that Sister D touched everyone, including the religious.

Sister D was an intelligent, witty and well-read nun who was an inspiration to us all. She had clarity of thought, especially when dealing with difficult issues, and moved on with fortitude. She fulfilled her duties diligently with total dedication and an unflinching pursuit of what was right. She had a firm conviction to do right by everyone. She also had an innate passion to serve, for the benefit of others. Her passion for the education and holistic well-being of all our girls and schools, and the IJ community, is imprinted in us all.

Sister D embodied values that have inspired generations of our IJ girls and CJC graduands. These values included: resilience, fortitude, understanding, tolerance, empathy, and respect for all, especially the needy and the common man.

Under Sister D’s stewardship over the last 22 years, the Principals, Teachers and our IJ Schools have benefitted immeasurably from her guiding hand, forged from a lifetime of genuine and selfless service.

Sister D was the epitome of generosity, humility, warmth and compassion. Her quick wit and timely comebacks were always impressive. The experiences over the years of many of us with Sister D have been that she was an extremely caring and compassionate soul who loved everyone and who always put everyone else above herself.



She had a demeanour and touch that made us feel special.

All of us on the Board fully associate ourselves with the touching and meaningful eulogies delivered at the funeral Mass by Vivienne Lim, Sean La'Brooy and Donne Aeria (our ex-Chairperson of the IJ Board).

It has been a privilege and honour for each and every one of us on the Board to have known and worked closely with Sister D. She has left an indelible legacy with very fond thoughts and warm memories. Hers was a life very well-lived. She has been an inspiration to each and every one of us on the Board and well-loved by us. We honour her for her exemplary life of duty and service to us and the whole IJ community. She was a Supervisor par excellence.

All of us will miss Sister D terribly, not only as the Supervisor, Mentor, and Confidant, but also as an extremely lovely person who has always been there as a beacon of light and compassion.

In closing, may I say:

Sister D had given her life to God,  
faithfully placing her gifts and talents  
at His Service.

I am sure we can all well imagine,  
Jesus welcoming her  
at the gates of Paradise  
with these beautiful words:

*"Well done, good and faithful servant,  
enter into my joy."  
(Matthew 25:21).*

*Mr Hamsah Moosa and the IJ Board: 24 Aug 2016*