

King Edward VII Hall of Residence – A Link with the Medical School Since 1916

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Abstract

King Edward VII (“KE”) had been synonymous with the medical school and its associated hall of residence at Sepoy Lines since the 1910s. After the school became the Medical Faculty, the illustrious name remained with the Hall, which was rebuilt in 1957. For almost 90 years, KE has kept alive the rich history and traditions of a bygone era that embodied the passion and pride of both Singapore and Malaysia. The heroism of some Keviians during the Second World War and other exploits have led to many legends of the Hall. In 1987, it moved to its present location at Kent Ridge, and opened its doors to students from all other faculties. We count many personalities among our alumni, including some of the most prominent physicians in our country. The exuberant hall life, cultural pursuits and achievements of the residents contribute to the strong spirit of endeavour. Keviians over the decades have lived, worked, played and served to uphold the motto that means so much to all of us: TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO SERVE.

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Overview

For a very long time, King Edward VII (endearingly abbreviated “KE”) was synonymous with the medical school and its associated hall of residence. The name was first used for the School (later called College) in 1912 in recognition of a substantial gift from the King Edward VII Memorial Fund. It was to remain as such until 1949, when it became the Faculty of Medicine of the then University of Malaya.

As the medical school was the very first institution of higher learning in the colonial days serving the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States (FMS), it was inevitable that a hostel was set up to accommodate students from afar. FMS Hostel opened in 1916, but it was later demolished and replaced by a grand new hall in 1957. By that time, the College of Medicine had become the Faculty, and in order to perpetuate the name of King Edward VII, it was decided that the Hall would be named as such. It was opened by none other than the first Prime Minister of Malaya (later



Malaysia), Tunjku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj on 30 November 1957, with Professor AA Sandosham (of “Sandy’s Spice” fame) as the first Master.¹

Thus, for almost 90 years, “KE VII Hall” has kept alive the rich history and tradition of a bygone era that embodied the passion and pride of both Singapore and Malaysia. Some of the finest minds and colourful characters passed through its doors. The rich heritage of the Hall has been built on the lives and experiences of the many Keviians who called KE home away from home. This gave the more exuberant ones the opportunities to create legends and personas that were often bigger than life. Many of our alumni included some of the most prominent physicians in our countries and even beyond. Some became national leaders, most notably, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981 to 2003). They were all men and women of substance and honour.

Many Keviians served during the difficult years of the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation. Medical

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students worked as volunteers in the Medical Auxiliary Service, helping doctors tend to the sick and injured. On February 1942, a student was killed at the Tan Tock Seng Hospital dormitory. While a group of fellow students were digging a trench to bury him in one corner of the Singapore General Hospital grounds, a Japanese plane swooped by and in the raid, 10 more were killed. The names of the 11 students killed are commemorated in a bronze plaque in the College of Medicine building.²

After 30 years at Sepoy Lines, the Hall relocated to the new university campus at Kent Ridge, and it was officially opened by the then President Wee Kim Wee on 25 November 1988. Its present location on top of the ridge is itself another historical site, especially during the last days of the Japanese invasion. It also has a nice “country” setting amidst greenery and birds, with some rooms having a sea view as well. The move was more than a physical one; there was also a major social change – the integration of medics and students from other faculties of the growing university. Although viewed with apprehension by many residents, the move broke the isolation of medical and dental students from the rich diversity of campus life. About the move to Kent Ridge: *“I think it would do us a lot of good by expanding our horizons if we mix around with students from all other disciplines.”* (Grace Lee, Miss Kevian 1980/81)

In the period before the move to Kent Ridge, the residents sensed much uncertainty and anxiety in the affairs of the Hall. Response to activities and leadership positions was poor, and most of the concerned leaders expressed the hope that the move would result in a revival of interest and enthusiasm. *“The shift marks the climax of what has been a long wait. It is the ‘promised land’ of KE VII and in it lies the hope that KE will rise from the ashes in neogenesis, to claim its rightful place of glory among the hostels of Kent Ridge.”* (Fidah Alsagoff, President JCRC, 1986/87)

The year 1996 saw the retirement of 2 people who had had very long associations with the Hall. Professor Wong Wai Chow stepped down after 17 years, the longest serving Master in our history. Mr Lim Ah Pat, a much-respected father figure, retired as Manager after 27 years. Thus ended an era in KE, which saw its move from Sepoy Lines to Kent Ridge and the subsequent change from a medical hall to a comprehensive one.

Hall Residents

In the words of a long-serving and much loved Master:

“The purpose of a Hall of Residence is not to create an elitist hierarchy, but a company of men and women who in their word and deed become examples to society of high motivation and dedicated service... This then is the Hall ethos – not self-seeking or self-conceit, but a

selfless mind and a serving mind in seeking the truth of knowledge and a striving for the betterment of body and spirit for the common well-being of humanity.”

(Prof Khoo Oon Teik, 1968-1979¹)

During the Sepoy Lines days, the majority of residents were Malaysians (about 80%) and most of them stayed for the whole duration of the 5- or 6-year course. The composition of students was, as expected varied, covering the whole spectrum of personalities from the “boisterous to the Martians”.

Female students did not move into KE until 1960, when the top ‘D’ floor of one block was allotted to them (the other floors came later). They were earlier accommodated in a bungalow at Grange Road called “Holne Chase” (still standing today as the SANA headquarters). Naturally, there were interesting stories of male students “chasing around” the grounds of that house. Every year the female medics from Holne Chase would get together with the male medics to have a dinner at KE. The only fire ever reported in KE occurred on ‘D’ floor in 1984, which destroyed 2 rooms but thankfully caused no injuries. Today, females constitute about 50% of residents, and they play an active part in the activities and leadership of the Hall.

The Junior Common Room Committee (JCRC) was and remains the highest body of student leaders in the Hall. Over the years, it has had its fair share of intrigue and disputes. Some of the JCRC elections were bitterly contested, in which many a stirring speech was made. On a few occasions, whole JCRCs resigned en masse leaving the Hall leaderless. But soon, no matter how contentious, quarrels were resolved and things went back to normal again. It would not be incorrect to say that some residents cut their teeth in politics in the Hall. Medical students (often senior ones) dominated the presidency and other positions for the greater part of the first 3 to 4 decades. Some of them included Mahmud Merican, Toh Ban Hock, John Ramanathan, Khalid Hassan, Maurice Choo, K Prabhakaran, Christie Tan, Peter Lee, Tan Chi Chiu, Eugene Sim, Fidah Alsagoff, Lee Hung Ming, James Hui, Lee Chiern Earn, Ruban Poopalalingam, and Shanker Pasupathy. The first non-medical President was Paxton Loke, a biology student (1994/95).

No history of KE can be complete without mention of Professor Cheah Jin Seng, Resident Fellow for many years. Generations of alumni will always ask about him with much fondness. Every morning, the operatic music from his flat would provide students with a nice wake-up call, and nearly every afternoon he would be at tea (when we used to have them) to regale them with his many stories.

Looking back, Emeritus Professor K Shanmugaratnam (resident, 1938-40) had this to say: *“Though I’m not a*

social animal, I still meet up with my old friends at the Medical Alumni get-togethers, which are very popular. We take the chance to exchange old memories and update old quarrels. I think on the whole we had a lot of fun.”

Hall Life

What was so special about the KE way of life? Only a bona fide resident can truly explain:

“... there is something... in these stories that speaks of friendship, bonding and a spirit unique to generations of Keviians. Perhaps it stems from the familiar songs and traditions that Keviians today can identify with just as easily as Keviians from the past. Or perhaps it comes from that indefinable common way of life and speech that makes Keviians one. There are definitely lessons to be learnt here – not least being the sense of bonding amongst Keviians that should never be lost.”

(Joyce Lin, 1996¹)

In the early years, activities were always spontaneous and enthusiastically sought after. Keviians knew how to study hard and also play hard. Games were “fought” for the glory of winning and for the Hall. The various cultural celebrations were opportunities for the residents to relive childhood memories such as the lantern procession, Chinese New Year, Christmas and Deepavali. In the first few years following 1957, formal hall dinners were weekly affairs, but they soon became monthly, and today we only have them four times a year because of the very busy calendar.

KE used to be known for its prowess on the sports field. Depending on the year, some of the successes were in hockey, tennis, squash, basketball, badminton and road relay. It was also known for billiards, carroms and chess. Over the years, although the residents continued to be active in playing games, they were generally not very successful in the competitions. For a long time, KE has had 2 unique clubs – Wushu and Fencing, both of which remain popular to this day.

Community welfare has always been a concern of Keviians. The Chairman of KE Welfare (1983/84) was asked how he could manage with a “minuscule budget of \$2700”. He replied: *“Although pecuniary assistance is an aspect, more important was their contribution of companionship.”* Many visits and parties for various charitable organisations remain a fixture of the calendar each year. Even when a project like Hall Play seeks to raise funds for a voluntary organisation, the residents will arrange visits to establish a human relationship with the beneficiaries as well.

Orientation is always a source of amusing and fond recollections. The many unmentionable anecdotes are

remembered as times of wonderful comradeship and bonding, which endeared many to the Hall. Great friendships were also forged during those times. Over the years, orientation has become less raucous and intimidating, and more friendly and mild. As part of the activities, there is the unforgettable excitement and passion of spending many sleepless nights building the float for the annual Rag Day.

“Orientation is a necessary adjunct to a freshie’s experiences. It introduces him to seniors concerned for his welfare; it breaks down social barriers. And the experience is enriching because it teaches people to work together under pressure.”

(Keviiian, 1983/84)

In 1969, a decision was made for KE to “look after” all the students at Sepoy Lines, which included all the non-hostelites. For a fee, they were given access to all the facilities and could even buy meals there. It was generally a welcome move, but as always, student politics got in the way. Some were angry and antagonistic at having to pay for “dubious facilities”. Nevertheless, the scheme was implemented and a number of activities were organised, including “residents versus non-residents” games (it died a natural death soon after the move to Kent Ridge). Initially, much effort was made to integrate the non-hostelites:

“... the formation of activist groups based on separation, religion and race must be discouraged and eliminated. If every member, resident and non-resident, contributes his share, there is no reason to doubt our success in our efforts to strive, to seek and to serve.”

(Keviiian, 1970/71)

KE Culture

KE has a rich tradition of excellence in the performing arts, represented by such groups as Hall Choir, KE Band, KE Dance, Xinyao and others. In the past, we used to have the Lotus Club for artistic expressions and Hall concerts; now they are called Culture Nights, held both internally and externally. Although the amenities at Sepoy Lines were inadequate, there was no lack of spontaneity to show off the hostelites’ artistic talents. *“We even had impromptu sketches and musical recitals during hall dinners.”* (Maurice Choo, President 1972/73). He was instrumental in getting the Hall Stage built in 1972, followed the next year by the first Hall Play, thus beginning the long tradition of hall productions.

The Hall Play remains one of the much-anticipated highlights each year in hall life. It brings together more than a hundred residents of diverse capabilities and talents to work as cast, crew, producers, directors, technicians, and in a whole host of administrative committees. *“We put a lot of*

emphasis on the Hall Play... We were the only hall then to have a proper hall play every year and a traditional British kind of play with a proper script and sets and costumes at that." (Lee Chiern Earn, President, 1990/91) Some of the prominent productions included "*Teahouse of the August Moon*", "*Pygmalion*", "*On the Razzle*", "*Cindy*", "*Alcmena's Perfume*" and "*Pistachios and Whipped Cream*". The biggest production ever was the musical drama "*Faust*", based on an original musical score written by a Keviiian. It ran for 2 nights in October 1993 at the Kallang Theatre, involving close to 300 residents, alumni and friends. In recent years, some of the plays were written and produced by the residents, including "*White – An Endless Dream*" and "*Epilogue*". To celebrate the 30th anniversary in 2003, the comedy "*Barefoot in the Park*" was successfully held at the new University Cultural Centre. Generally, the plays were very well received: "*I must confess that I went to the play reluctantly. I came away from it very reluctantly.*" (Y Cohen, Senior Surgeon, 1983/84)

A recent development that has gained prominence is the Annual Chinese Song Writing Competition (Xin Qing Rong Ji). It started as a small local event among students who enjoyed composing and performing Chinese songs. By 2003/04, during its sixth run, it had already attained national status, co-sponsored by the Central Singapore Community Development Council and co-organised by KE, Kallang Community Club and the Kolam Ayer Youth Executive Committee. It attracted a total of 94 entries from schools, junior colleges, polytechnics, universities and other institutions from all over Singapore. Among the many attractive prizes were offers of recording contracts from commercial production companies.

Concluding Remarks

We cannot fail but recognise our roots, which are proudly displayed in the strong spirit of endeavour and adventure in our past and present residents. Through thick and thin, ups and downs, Keviiians over the decades have lived, worked, played and served to uphold the motto that means so much to all of us: TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO SERVE. There will always be new challenges, as the world around us changes ever so rapidly. What the Editor of the Keviiian wrote when the Hall moved to Kent Ridge is relevant even today:

*"... for history has shown us enough times,
that any institution which fails to recognise
the need for change and then make these
changes are destined for mediocrity and
subsequent obsolescence."*
(Sailesh Kumar, 1987/88)

*"Each dawn beckons every Keviiian
To rise to yet another day,
And to live up to his motto:
To STRIVE for excellence of the whole man,
To SEEK out the pressing problems of the day...
and reach out for the yet unknown frontiers of
knowledge,
To get out into a world of need and SERVE."*
(Keviiian, 1983/84)

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