

Brother Kevin Byrne,  
Principal 1978 - 1991

On Nov 1991 SJI bade farewell to its longest-serving principal, Reverend Brother Kevin Byrne, who retired after being at the helm for 13 years. On these pages, we pay tribute to a special teacher and friend.



‘He inspires me to give my best.’

— Ms Regina Rozario

**K**evin Byrne was born to a farming family in County Wicklow, Ireland, and was educated in Ireland and England. Recruited by the De La Salle Brothers, he was among the few who volunteered to work in the Far East. “I was young and adventurous,” he says, recalling the eagerness with which he stepped forward for a posting to Asian countries he knew hardly anything about. Sailing East in 1952 he was thrilled by his stops at exotic places like Port Said, the Suez Canal and Bombay. His first posting was to St. John’s Institution in Kuala Lumpur. Over the next quarter century he moved to Christian Brothers Schools elsewhere in Peninsular Malaysia, including stints in Penang and Ipoh. Brother Kevin became principal of SJI in 1978, when the school was still at Bras Basah Road. The major developments which took place during his term as principal were the relocation of the School to spanking new premises at Malcolm Road, and the arrival of SJI as an independent school. Brother Kevin was convinced of the advantages of going independent. It meant greater autonomy for the school, freedom to hire teachers, add new facilities to the school, introduce interesting extra curricular activities and create innovative programmes aimed at producing well-rounded Josephians. Opportunities for all these were limited at the dilapidated Bras Basah site. The new Malcolm Road location promised greater scope for adding the range of facilities a top boys’ school should have, and it worked well with the idea of going



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independent. Brother Kevin played a key role in negotiations with the Education Ministry, and meetings with the SJI development committee.

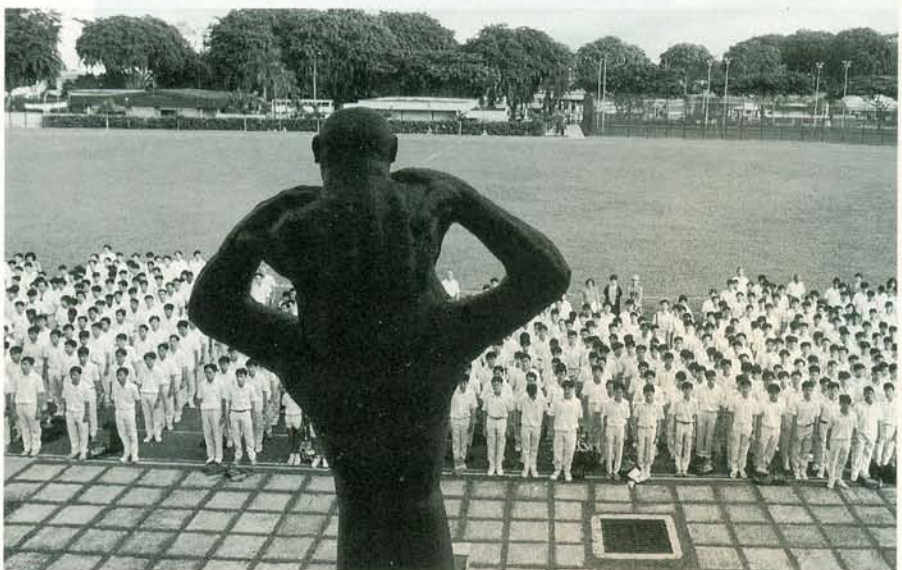
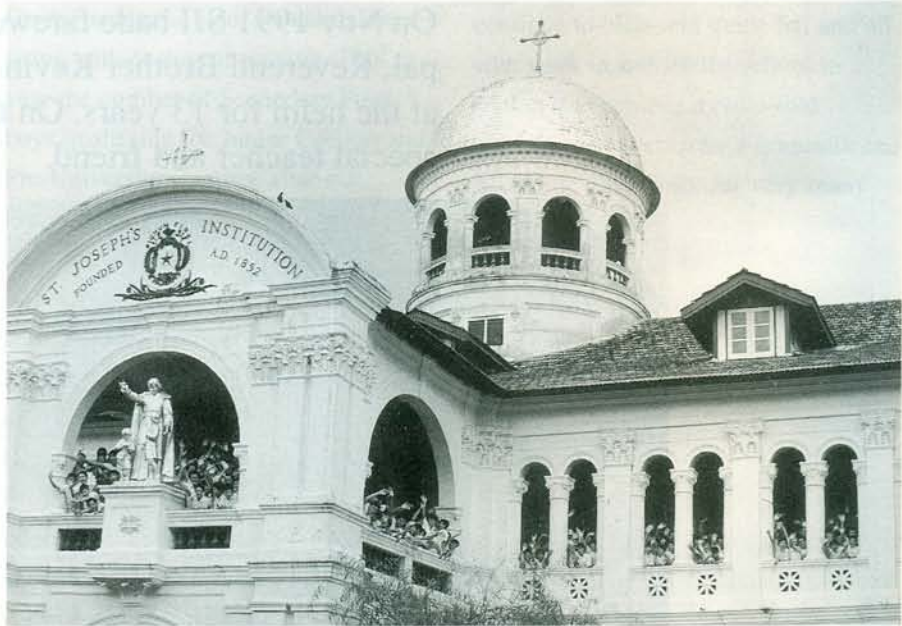
The gates of SJI at Bras Basah were closed for the last time on Dec 29 1987. The following year, Josephians streamed into their new school at Malcolm Road. SJI was now also an independent school, with its first batch of "independent boys" in Secondary One.

Looking back Brother Kevin says that seeing boys grow up and graduate gave him a lot of satisfaction. How have Josephians changed over the years? "Josephians are more sophisticated and confident now, but they were more respectful and obedient in the past." But one thing that has not changed, he added, was that Josephians' loyalty to their alma mater remained as strong as ever.

Leaving SJI at this point, Brother Kevin is surer than ever that the decision to go independent was the right one. The school's academic performance has been improving, and new strides have been made in ECA records. The staff strength grew from 88 in 1987 to over 100, with many younger graduate teachers joining the school.

Brother Kevin leaves Singapore for a holiday in his native Ireland, before attending a spiritual renewal course in England. He expects to be back in Singapore after a year or so and hopes to renew his ties with SJI. With the major part of his life's work behind him, Brother Kevin said: "I am glad I came to SJI, and glad that I was able to make a contribution to education in South-East Asia."

*by Christopher Koh*





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'In 1960, Brother Kevin taught us Sixth Form economics. The 18 girls in our class thought him very good looking, and he reminded us of a soldier, with his crew cut.'

— Ms Kang Kim Soo



Kuala Lumpur:  
Brother Kevin's first posting was to St. John's Institution in Kuala Lumpur. These pictures are from the school's 60th anniversary souvenir publication, 1964.

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Brother Joseph Kiely (left) has known Brother Kevin since their school days in Ireland. He remembers how Brother Kevin was a soccer fullback in university and enjoyed basketball as a young brother in Malaysia.

'Just as every team must be prepared to lose its best player, we have to bid farewell to this great leader.'



Miss Balkis Bee (right), Brother Kevin's secretary at SJI, was always struck by the tolerance, care and understanding he showed to students, their parents and staff alike.

'No words can describe his goodness,'

— Miss Bee



Brother Oliver Rogers (far right) first met Brother Kevin in 1974, in Teluk Intan, Perak, Malaysia. He remembers Brother Kevin as a shy and reserved man with a dry sense of humour. His most outstanding quality:

'His ability to stay cool in the most trying of situations.'





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'In his own simple way, he has reached out and touched the hearts of many teachers and Josephians in his 13 years as principal. So, Brother, here goes, with the words from a very touching Irish song:

Oh it may be someday  
I'll go back to Ireland  
If it's only at the closing of  
my day

To see again the ripples  
on the trout stream  
And to watch the sun go  
down

On gallaway Bay.

We'll always be in touch.'

— Mr Patrick Zehnder

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‘He has a very child-like sense of humour. He’s always willing to hear your point of view and always sincere in his dealings with boys and teachers.’

— Mrs Therese Ng

‘He adores in all things, the will of God, in his regard.’

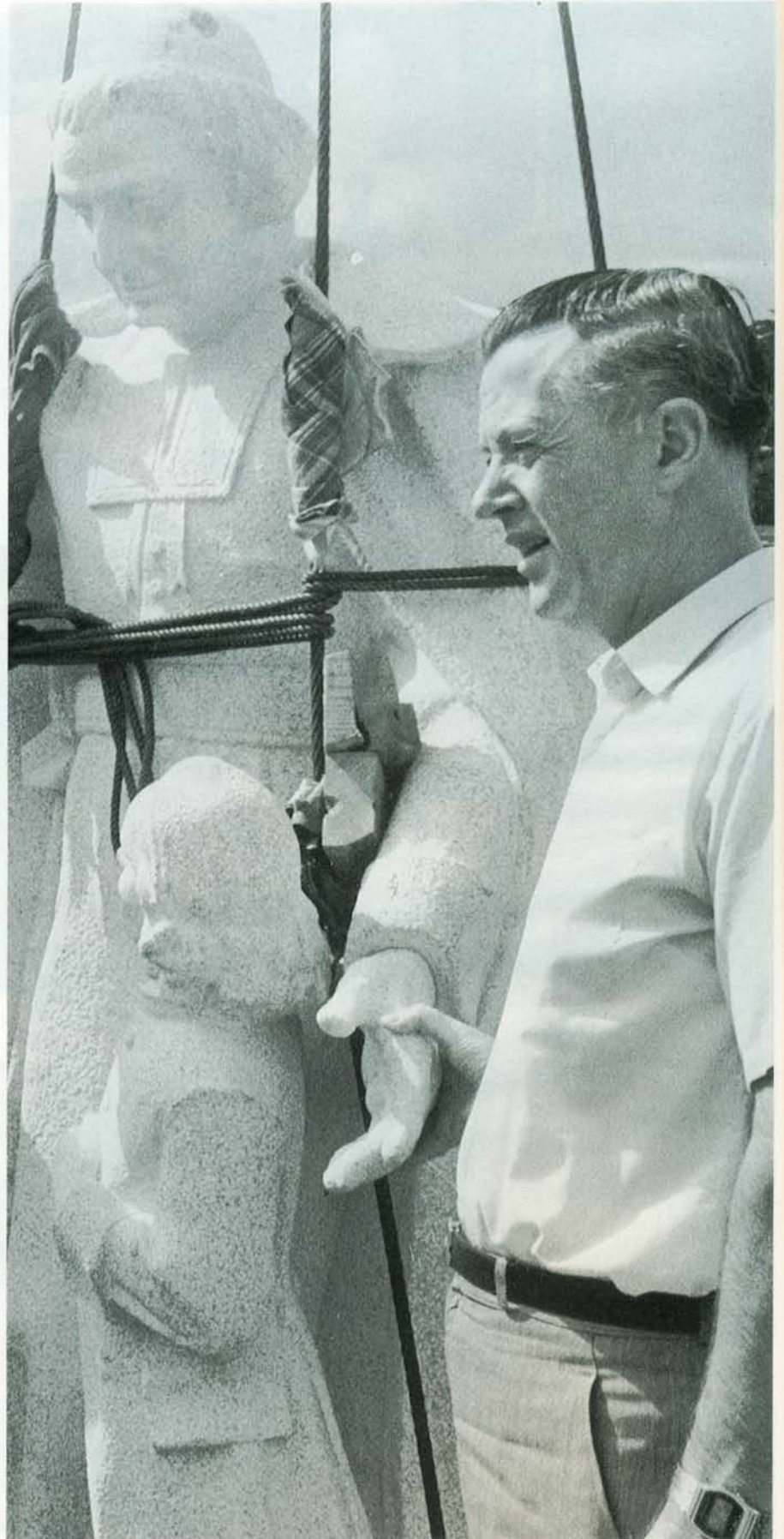
— Mr Michael Chin

‘He is humorous, mild, polite, approachable and has moral cultivation. In short, a true gentleman.’

— Mrs Hsu Chan Tho

‘He is totally different from other principals I’ve worked with. He is quiet, doesn’t really make his presence felt, yet we know he’s there when we need him.’

— Mrs Vimala Alexander





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'Those of us in Secondary One in 1991 knew you for a mere year. Yet in that short time you have made a deep impression on us. Your warmth radiates along the corridors of SJI. You have made us feel we belong here. We will miss your deep Irish brogue as you wish us "Good morning" every Monday morning at assembly. Our thoughts and prayers for your health and happiness go with you. Thank you, Brother Kevin.'

— Kajam Ratnakumar

*Interviews by Ashley Liew  
Paul Lew*

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'He started in SJI as an English and Literature teacher in Sec 4 before becoming Principal. He is a very good teacher. Old boys still come back to see him and are very grateful to him.'

— Mr Tang Wing Kee



'Brother Kevin is very considerate, kind and firm. He is a good principal.'

— Mr Sankaralingam



'It has been a joy for me to work with him. I have found him endearing, ever faithful to God, having great trust in God.'

— Mrs Maureen Pestana