

A Man for Others

It was the year 1945 in colonial Singapore. A young boy, barely five years of age lived in a camp for prisoners of war. He led a tough and hard life, if you could call that life – one that would break a mother's heart.

By Lim Boon Siang

As if life was not cruel enough, Lawrence Da Silva had also lost his father, a volunteer machine gunner who fought valiantly in defence of Singapore; and later on became a war orphan too. Yet, despite the tenderness in his age, the child gritted his teeth and pressed on, nourished constantly by his unwavering love for God and his staunch faith in Him. He survived the ordeal.

When the war ended, the youngster who started school late, enrolled in St. Joseph's Institution. Having lost his father in the war, it was not difficult to imagine the difficult financial circumstances he was in. He would have had to bear with the feeling of coldness and hunger from an empty stomach and agonise over the payment of his school fees if not for the school which took care of his financial needs and cared for him as a person. This much-appreciated gesture and support of the school did more than finance him through his Pre-University education in SJI for it also sowed the seed of kindness and philanthropy in a blossoming young man who was determined to reciprocate the humanity he received. Later, blessed with a government scholarship, the young man went on to pursue a university education and returned to serve a government bond at the Customs Department. His career in the field of education began at Singapore Polytechnic where he was the Assistant Registrar before he started United World



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HIS LIFE TO PROTECT
RS WHOM HE LOVED.
TOME OF OUR MOTTO:
MODEL FOR JOSEPHIANS.

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College (SEA) in 1971 after a personal invitation from the late Professor George Thomas. A highly-successful businessman today, Mr Lawrence Da Silva who has helmed various top-notch educational institutions, has not forgotten how the experience at SJI as a student has shaped his attitude to giving back to society.

Today, Mr Da Silva's name is synonymous with benevolence, success and his circle of influence extends beyond the LaSallian community to reach out to the wider community. He is the man whom the SJI Board of Governors entrusted to undertake the setting-up of an international school in 2006. Barely one year later, SJI International was launched followed by SJI Elementary in 2008. The combined enrolments of these two institutions currently stand at 1,300 pupils; a resounding endorsement of the quality and appeal of Lasallian education.

A sense of fulfillment fuelled by a desire to serve, Mr Da Silva, who also donates generously to scholarships, has been active in the Rotary Movement since 1983. A big-hearted man who gives and does much for others, he was extremely reserved and humble when it came to talking about his monetary contributions. This gentleman, who had been on the SJI Board of Governors, takes pain to ensure that his various donations to charity and institutions are downplayed. For him, life has to have the essence of giving and being of service to others. As he

explained, "SJI has provided me with a first-class education and cared for me as a person. Surely, when the appropriate time came for me to give back to my alma mater and the society in general, it was not only a natural but a pleasurable thing to do," putting emphasis on the last two adjectives. "Saying 'Thank you' through service is the best way of doing so," the philanthropist added.

Mr Da Silva has risen from adversity to become a man for others. The hardship in his childhood years has equipped him with resilience and a sense of compassion for people, enabling him to fully empathize with those who experience financial struggles. As if reliving the days of destitution through his words, he spoke with softness in his eyes and intensity in his words, "Imagine you are a student living in Singapore with no money in your pocket to buy food during recess. It is hard. But you must not blame anyone – not even your family. It is God's way of preparing you for the future. You do the best you can and you will surely excel one day. Be thankful for what you have because a positive attitude and a graceful acceptance will definitely help in the learning process." It became apparent that for the young Lawrence, it must have been this devoted faith in God's plan for him complemented by his graceful acceptance and endurance of privation that an indomitable spirit and commitment to service developed.

Recognising that many young Josephians today come from relatively more comfortable family backgrounds that may render it difficult for them to be able to empathise with others, Mr Da Silva hopes these boys will embrace service and the spirit of giving. He believes that the students' firsthand experience in community service will open the window to see and feel the suffering and the deprivation that make them appreciate what they have and awaken in them a sense of empathy. The Social Service Programme he initiated in United World College aims to do just that. An integral part of the school curriculum, this programme engages youths in service and connects them to the less fortunate in the society while giving expression to the core values critical to the holistic development of the students.

As SJI continues to thrive as one of the top-notch schools in Singapore with the introduction of the IB programme and providing world-class education to meet the needs of the 21st century, Mr Da Silva is confident that SJI students will become good citizens who are men of integrity and men for others. What advice does Mr Da Silva have for the students? "Do your best for others and good fortune will come to you. When blessed with good fortune, recycle it to do good again." A man for others indeed.