

Expat Foremothers

BY MELINDA MURPHY

On 8 March, we celebrate International Women’s Day and the contributions women have made across the globe. Here in the Lion City, the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame recognises women who’ve had a major impact on the island’s history, including many expats. On these pages, we take a look at a handful of Singapore’s foremothers from different parts of the world – amazing women who have helped to shape the nation.

Evelyn Norris, Eurasian 1918-2014

A student at the Raffles Girl School (RGS) from 1924 to 1933, Evelyn later came back to her alma mater as a history teacher. Rarely relying on text books, Evelyn instead brought history alive for the girls, drawing on her own background, which included volunteering in the Royal Air Force in Sri Lanka during WWII. She then served as the school’s Principal from 1961 to 1976.

A dynamic and hands-on leader, she made many innovative changes to ensure the girls’ school kept pace with others. She also implemented holding assemblies in English one week, Malay the next and then Tamil. Believing in a well-rounded education, she introduced many sports to the school and encouraged more co-curricular activities – she herself was involved in many activities outside of the school including serving as a Major, commanding the Singapore Women Auxiliary Corps and commanding the girls’ section of the National Cadet Corps.

A huge animal rights activist, Evelyn also volunteered at the SPCA together with her sister. When she died at the age of 95, hundreds of students from RGS and from the Crescent Girls’ School (where she was the founding principal) attended her wake.



Photo: Raffles Girls School

Dr Charlotte Ferguson-Davie, British 1880-1943

The wife of Singapore’s first Anglican Bishop, Charlotte Ferguson-Davie was a medical doctor at a time when many women were not yet practising medicine. She founded the St Andrew’s Medical Mission in 1913, with a dispensary on Bencoolen Street to provide medical care for destitute women and children.

During her time in Singapore, Dr Ferguson-Davie set up two hospitals: St Andrew’s Mission Hospital for Women and Children (1923) and St Andrew’s Orthopaedic Hospital (1938) for children with muscular deformities. She was also instrumental in spearheading nursing training courses for local women.

This British doctor’s legacy of caring for the disadvantaged and underserved in Singapore has inspired the medical mission to grow. Today, St Andrew’s Mission Hospital’s stable of services include a community hospital, senior care centres, nursing homes and an autism centre comprising a school and adult services.



Photo: St Andrew’s Mission Hospital

Shirin Fozdar, Indian 1905-1992

One of the most prominent advocates of women’s rights in Singapore during the 1950s, Shirin Fozdar played a key role in securing better legal protection for women. She began speaking out about women’s rights as a teen in India and continued activism in Singapore when she and her husband moved here in 1950 to spread the Baha’i faith.

Polygamy was common in Singapore at that time, and successful men often showed off their latest wife at society events. In the Malay community, the divorce rate was 60 percent because men could arbitrarily divorce their wives. Appalled by this, Shirin helped create the Singapore Council of Women (SCW).

Throughout the 1950s, the SCW campaigned for a ban on polygamy and for better legal protection for women. The Syariah Court was set up in 1958 and new procedures led to a dramatic fall in the divorce rate in the Muslim community. In 1959, the People’s Action Party (PAP) included women’s rights in its election manifesto; in 1961, the Women’s Charter became law. Among other things, the charter outlawed polygamy for non-Muslims. Shirin also lived in Thailand for ten years, working to help destitute women and girls.



St Mathilde Raclot, French

1814-1911

CHIJMES was originally known as the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ), a girls' school established in 1854 by an order of French Catholic nuns led by Reverend Mother St Mathilde Raclot. Just ten days after arriving in Singapore from Penang and moving into Caldwell House on Victoria Street, the nuns began to take in students. Soon, they also started a Convent Orphanage and a Home for Abandoned Babies as they found day-old babies were being left at their doorstep.

The nuns conducted two classes at the school: one for fee-paying students and the other for orphans and the poor. To raise funds for their work, St Mathilde taught needlework to her fellow nuns and their students, and they sold their products to the wives of the local Chinese merchants. The school grew rapidly and, by the turn of the century, there were some 300 students.

Today, the eleven Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus schools in Singapore stand as a testament to St Mathilde's work. All but 20 of the 79 years that St Mathilde was a nun were spent in Asia. After Singapore, she led the first group of French nuns to Japan to work with disadvantaged women and children, fulfilling a childhood dream.



Ann Elizabeth Wee, British

1926-2019

Often described as the founding mother of social work in Singapore, Ann Elizabeth Wee arrived here in 1950 when she was only 23 years old to be reunited with her fiancé whom she met at Cambridge University while studying at the London School of Economics.

First a teacher for four years at Methodist Girls' School, Ann became a training officer at the Social Welfare Department, in charge of counselling and advice, and visiting low-income families in their homes. She mastered Cantonese so as to be better able to reach out to the women in the squatter areas who had mostly been abandoned or abused by their husbands. Until the Women's Charter became law in 1961, women had few rights. Marriages were mostly customary, bigamy was commonplace, and there was no such thing as a divorce decreed by a law court.

Joining the Department of Social Studies at the then University of Malaya, Ann helped shape the education system for social work undergraduates. Ten years later, she became the department head and spearheaded the establishment of the Honours degree course. She co-authored books about social welfare and sat on the Panel of Advisors to the Juvenile Court for 40 years.

Intrigued and want to learn more about the nation's foremothers? Head on over to the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame website at swhf.sg. You can even take a heritage walk with them where expert guides offer fascinating information about the women, their achievements and their legacies. Check it out! *EL*