



## Adding Up Her 56 Years in RGS

While teaching was a profession Mrs Ummu Choo entered “by default”, things must have added up for her to spend 56 glorious years teaching in RGS. She even outgrew an allergy to chalk, when at one stage, it got so bad that she was advised by her doctor to “change to another profession”.

The Mathematics teacher, who began her RGS journey in 1961, trained as a lower secondary general science teacher, but due to a shortage of teachers for certain subjects in the 60s, ended up teaching Literature, then Geography and Malay, and finally Mathematics, which is the subject she has been teaching up till today.

Turning down the appointment of Vice-Principal three times, she attributed that “rebellious” behaviour to simply, her love for the school, teaching and her students. In its place, she took on the role of Senior Assistant, where on top of teaching, she literally managed the day-to-day running of the school, along with the Principal and two other Senior Assistants. Her responsibilities even included handwriting sheets of student details for the ‘O’ Level Examination. Yes, those were the simpler pre-technology pervasive days, and while it would have been less tedious to have been able to type or even scan in student details into the computer, as it is today, Mrs Choo remembers teaching then as being a joy and a breeze because there were “no distractions”.

As she formulates her plans after leaving RGS this June, there is none of the usual ‘travel around the world’ or ‘slow down and catch a breather’ sort of

post-retirement plans. On her agenda instead, are plans to take up courses, continue with her duties as member of the Braddell Heights Community Club Women's Executive Committee, help with NParks' community garden projects, and of course, to give tuition at her home because nothing stimulates and refreshes her mind more than teaching.

Adding up her years of teaching in RGS, along with her many accolades, Mrs Choo is quick to attribute her career highs to the faith the school Principals had in her (she has worked under eight RGS Principals), and also the love and care of her colleagues. "No one can achieve anything without help from other people. The element of faith is important and you do not want to let anybody down, and that spurs you on to sometimes doing things that may be challenging."

A former RGS student herself, Mrs Choo is also looking forward to the completion of the new campus. "As a student at RGS, we were told back then that we were going to have a new RGS building, which will have a gymnasium etc. Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine a school with (that kind of facilities back then). Now I am glad that 50 years down the road, that vision is going to be realised. My biggest dream is to see all those things materialise in my lifetime for RGS."

### **Becoming A Teacher, By Default**

*"During my time, there was this mass advertisement in the papers, inviting us to apply for various jobs. So I applied, and after going through several selections, I was given an opportunity to do either Physiotherapy or Occupational Therapy. However, the condition was that I would have to work in Singapore for six months, then go to Australia for at least five years. Being an only child, and with my mum as a single parent, I could not bear the thought of leaving her alone and going away for such a long period of time. Hence, I rejected the offer. Thereafter, I went for other selections and eventually got into teaching."*

### **A Trip Down Memory Lane**

*"Honestly speaking, when I came back to RGS as a teacher in 1961, I was quite timid because my teachers were all still around. In those days, there was no privacy of a staff room – everyone just shared a huge table within a staff room, and each of us teachers would have a seat there. If you were an afternoon session teacher, you would have to wait until the morning session teachers evacuated the place before you can get a seat. Even so, when I was teaching, I felt very comfortable."*

### **Rising to Challenges**

*"In the 60s, the Ministry of Education faced a shortage of teachers. As such, RGS had this problem of not having the correct teacher to teach the correct subject. When Miss N E Norris was Principal then, she would get me to teach whichever subject that had a shortage of teachers. At that time, I thought she was 'bullying' me, but now when I look back, I see it as she had faith in me. I had great respect for her, so I would never say no to her. That was how I ended up teaching Literature, Geography, Malay and eventually Mathematics, even though I was trained in lower secondary general science. Initially, I was hesitant to agree to teaching Mathematics because the syllabus had changed quite a fair bit since the time I graduated. I had to get my other teacher-friends to send me books on the subject, where I spent the holidays reading and learning. After which, I taught six classes of secondary three Mathematics. Actually, come to think of it, I was already practising the theory of Growth Mindset back then! In spite of the fact that I had to self-train on the job, I had enough motivation to work hard because of the faith Miss Norris had in me. I am actually glad that she forced me to teach Mathematics (laughs), which fortunately, I still enjoy teaching up until today."*

## Major Awards Received:

*Long Service Award (2000) - Singapore Red Cross Society*

*Green Leaf Award (received twice) - Ministry of the Environment*

*The Efficiency Medal (1987) - Prime Minister's Office*

*The Public Service Medal (PBM) (2015) - Prime Minister's Office*



Most recently, Mrs Choo celebrated the 70th birthdays of her students from her first form class back in 1961 at Tanglin Club. "This is something I really treasure – the fact that so many years down the road, my students still remember me."

### Turning Down the Appointment of Vice-Principal (Three Times!)

"The letter of appointment came but I refused to accept it, much to the annoyance of then-RGS Principal, Mrs Chee Keng Soon. In those days, when the Ministry asks you to do something, most would obediently follow, and there I was, quite the rebellious teacher who simply just did not want to leave the school as I loved RGS, my students and teaching. Because of that, I became Senior Assistant in the school. On top of a reduced teaching load, I saw to the day-to-day running of the school, along with the Principal and two other Senior Assistants. Some of my roles included overseeing the duties of the school servants, acting as the school's safety officer, managing the school's estate needs, and helping in the collection and banking of school fees every month. Come to think of it, it was quite scary carrying so much cash with us. Fortunately, nothing bad ever happened!"

### Advocate of the Green Movement

"RGS was one of the few schools that was very much ahead in terms of green activities and of course, I am a strong supporter of the green

movement. I was the one who initiated the International Coastal Clean-Up project back in the 90s, which has been going on until today. I also initiated the Protect and Care of Pulau Ubin project, where secondary two students were brought to clean up the island. Another project that nobody else did was vermicomposting. I was given some Australian red worms, and I reared them with the fruit pulps that I gathered from the canteen. With the compost produced, I would use it to fertilise the soil in the school's mini garden. However, when I



During Founder's Day 2015, Mrs Choo, along with several other individuals, were honoured as pioneer educators of RGS.

*first retired, nobody else in the school wanted to carry on, so that project had to be given up. Together with my students, I was involved in a reforestation project with the Ministry of Environment, where we would try out different methods of returning native trees to areas in Bukit Timah and MacRitchie Reservoir. For all our involvement in green activities, the school was awarded the Green Leaf Award under the corporate category. I am also very thankful to be recognised for my involvement in various green activities, being a two-time recipient of the individual category of the Green Leaf Award.”*

**Changes to RGS over the Years**

*“The school has always been at the forefront of learning and implementing new things; our students today are very fortunate to be given a lot of opportunities to learn and grow. If they want to take part in competitions and are willing to raise to the occasion, the school would always give them the support. As compared to my time as a student in RGS, opportunities were very few. In fact, we did not even have a Science lab of our own – we had to go by bus to Gan Eng Seng School just to learn Science! Even when we had a lab of our own later on, we did not have proper equipment, and the science lab attendant was unqualified as well. Hence, many of our chemicals were contaminated – mini explosions were the order of the day during lessons (laughs). But that was also how my classmates and I learnt Science.”*



Mrs Choo along with her former Red Cross Society students.

“I think we need to have confidence in ourselves. We should not think that we are not able to do something without even trying. No matter how difficult we think a task is, it is always worthwhile to give it a try because you will never know, you may grow to enjoy it, just like how I came to enjoy teaching Mathematics.”

- Mrs Ummu Choo, on advice for fellow teachers



*In 2014, Mrs Choo led the Mathematics department in terrarium-making for sale during Homecoming to help raise funds for the RGS New Campus Development Fund. She also rendered her services to NParks that same year for Clean and Green Week 2014, training over 100 people in making and growing terrariums.*