S’pore’s 1st law class 50 years on

Luminaries in pioneer batch pay tribute to founding dean

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What do Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh and former police commissioner Goh Yong Hong have in common?

They all belong to Singapore’s pioneer batch of 22 law graduates from the former University of Malaya, who went on to shine in society for the next half a century.

Other alumni members of what is probably the most illustrious law cohort in Singapore include former law dean Thio Su Mien, Emeritus Professor Koh Kheng Lian, former High Court judge Amarjeet Singh, and former Law Society president T. P. B. Menon.

They were all present last night at their Class of 1961 reunion at their old Bukit Timah campus, now home to National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Faculty of Law.

Top on their minds was the founding dean of the school, Professor Lionel A. Sheridan, whom they credited for their current standing.

In his honour, the class launched a fund-raising campaign for a new professorship – the Lionel A. Sheridan Professorship – for the NUS law school. The campaign has a $3 million target, which it hopes to raise primarily from the law alumni with the Government matching the donations.

Details of the professorship are still being firm ed up. Prof Sheridan joined the then University of Malaya’s department of law in July 1956 after arriving from Belfast, Northern Ireland. At the time, there was a recognition that lawyers needed to be trained locally.

He was on a shoestring budget, but Prof Sheridan fervently set about building the school from scratch, selling the course to major schools in Malaya.

He left in 1963. By then, the seeds had been sown for the school to evolve into a full-fledged faculty that has since received accolades across the globe.

University president Tan Chorh Chuan said at the reunion that the “indelible mark” left by Prof Sheridan is clear from the students in his first class, who have contributed greatly to Singapore.

Now 83, the professor lives in Cardiff, Wales.

Speaking through Mr Menon, he returned the tribute by commending his students’ qualities.

“Did one anticipate then that among their number, there would be a chief justice and other judges, a president of the law society, an ambassador-at-large and all manner of distinguished persons?”

“Yes, certainly. The expectations entertained by those who lectured, tutored and examined were extremely optimistic.”

In his speech, Chief Justice Chan recalled an incident that demonstrated the credentials of the fledgling school under Prof Sheridan, who, in 1958, spoke out in The Straits Times against the appointment of an English chief justice.

When an English lawyer issued a “nasty” reply questioning if the lecturer was qualified to weigh in, his students – Chief Justice Chan, Prof Koh and Mr Menon – hit back with a fierce riposte in the newspaper.

No further response came from the lawyer.

Chief Justice Chan said: “If Sheridan had not started classes in 1957, all of us might not be here now... all of us have lived and worked through the most turbulent and dynamic and stable phases of Singapore history... We are part of a huge success story, and we would like to believe that, in our own way, we have played a part in it, however small it may be.”

Among the 15 former classmates who showed up at last night’s reunion was Madam Lakshmi Swaminathan, 72, who flew in from India, where she returned after graduation.

The judge with the Asian Development Bank’s administrative tribunal said: “I want to meet as many of them as possible and catch up on what’s happened in the past 50 years. Our batch has done pretty well, I must say.”

Those who want to contribute to the professorship can visit this website: http://giving.nus.edu.sg/give/detail/faculty-of-law

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