

Farewell, Mr RI

He enjoyed debating with the best and brightest, and gave his all to RI, which he led as the school's first Asian principal. Yesterday, Mr V Ambiavagar (right) passed away. Ex-RI student SANTOKH SINGH remembers...



Ex-RI student Santokh Singh remembers

Source: The New Paper, January 11, 2002.
(courtesy of Lim Han Ming, Editor)

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HE was a young boy when he came to Malaysia on a ship from Sri Lanka with his family.

He studied at Methodist Boys' School in Kuala Lumpur but was soon moving again, this time to Singapore.

He walked every day to Raffles Institution (RI), the school to which he devoted himself until his death yesterday. He was 96, and had succumbed to pneumonia.

He is survived by his wife, also a retired school principal, and four children.

One of Mr V Ambiavagar's fondest memories was debating.

He had reminded me, when I met him just a week before his birthday on Oct 20 last year, about taking on the likes of the late David Marshall, the former Chief Minister, and Sir George Oehlers, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly during colonial days.

HARD WORK

Indeed, the early events of Mr Ambiavagar's childhood made him learn to fight the good fight — that of the underdog making it good through discipline and hard work.

That is the V Ambiavagar thousands of Rafflesians would have come to know better, if only he had published his memoirs.

I was privileged to read his manuscript while working on a fund-raising project for our alma

mater, a pictorial history of Raffles Institution.

The fighting spirit of the man comes through in his writing.

He was indefatigable, even at 90. Later, he set himself in front of his computer in his Telok Kurau home to type away.

An educator at heart, he rose to the top of the service, retiring as Acting Director/Permanent Secretary of Education in 1961.

As a teacher at RI from 1932, he fought the bias of colonial rule to stand on par with the Caucasian staff, even if they had a separate — and better — staff room.

Mr Ambiavagar was rightfully honoured in 1958, when he became the first Asian to be appointed headmaster of Raffles Institution.

He was an educator who could motivate his pupils in class, on the field, in the library and the hall.

An avid sportsman, he led the school's hockey teams to numerous victories.

He stayed fit well into his 90s by taking regular walks.

He was just as active at RI, reviving the school's History Society, and was adviser to the school's magazine board, driven by a love for writing that would culminate with the publishing of Easy Money in 1992.

To several ministers, one chief minister, two prime ministers, three presidents and more, he was friend, friendly rival, teacher or mentor.

MR WIEY ON MR AMBIAVAGAR

He insisted on extreme efficiency, exemplary conduct, hard work, punctuality and serious devotion to duty. This attitude pervaded the entire school... The school then was in tip-top shape. (The boys) had the greatest regard for him... They showed this when he visited the school, as acting deputy director of education, on the school's Founder's Day celebration in 1960. As he ascended the stage, the boys commenced a thunderous applause that could not be calmed, except by Ambiavagar himself. He was visibly moved.

— Excerpts from *The Eagle Breeds A Gryphon* by Mr Eugene Wijesingha who, as headmaster, took RI into the era of the independent school

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