

“Old Girls” Demystified

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The term “old girls” has come to be associated with the alumnae of any “prestigious” all-girls secondary school in Trinidad. What prompts them to informally get together approximately three decades after they have graduated from the institution?

The recent funeral of a classmate turned out to be a reunion of sorts, prompting the second spontaneous reunion of a few of the year group who were available.

Are old girls special in any way? What are their topics of conversation? What are their aspirations? Have their dreams been fulfilled? What exactly are the ties that bind?

On this particular Sunday, each had abandoned her family to be a part of this get-together. No doubt being with their ex-classmates was like being with family—feeling a sense of belonging, sharing some common thread, holding onto the anchor of school days that had brought them to the place they now inhabit.

So they were finally able to ask Myrtyln after all these years why, as a student, she always seemed to be in trouble. She always arrived late to school and accumulated bad marks against her house. She travelled from Marabella by bus to and from school, which brings us to the point about Zaps having to travel by bus from San Fernando to Princes Town for the first time. Zaps related that she decided to ask Myrtyln, the expert bus traveller, to accompany her down the hill to get her bus. Though Myrtyln acceded to her request, she would not walk alongside Zaps on the public street. Their worlds were different and Myrtyln couldn't be seen in the company of this novice, this nerd, so neat, so proper, bookbag so big, so eager to get home. Additionally, Miss Myrtyln never left the school compound with haste. She had to powder her nose and pull her skirt up to a shorter length before hitting High Street. So Zaps was usually left rushing to get on the last bus. Both declared that they had enjoyed their high school days.

And then there was Paula. Nails always long and polished, against the school rules. Skirt usually shorter than stipulated. Mature beyond our years. And present she was, with this motley yet cohesive crew, reminiscing about the old days but, equally importantly, sharing thoughts and giving advice on life today. Discussion topics included female health issues, marriage, relationships, gender issues, and the exclusion of Needlework from the current timetable.

Strange, though, is the phenomenon that baffles most outsiders. What is it that binds these old girls in this way? What is it that makes them so easily recognisable? Is it the self-esteem developed from attending a “prestige” school? Is it the commonality of experience? Is it the fruit of the unwavering attention at school to procedure and apparent propriety manifested in the rules, regulations, and behaviour of those in authority? Is it that despite the authority that permeated the system or, indeed, because of it, the generations of old girls were able to achieve their personal and professional goals? Each person present at the get-together seemed to feel satisfied that they had made sensible

decisions along the way, had eventually headed in the right direction, and seemed to be leading fulfilling lives.

What of the new graduates of this school? Some old girls commented that some of the new old girls are now unrecognisable as typical old girls. In some instances, they do not shine in the workplace. There is a mismatch between organisational expectations of standards and the new graduates' understanding. New graduates are asking for definitions of standards and rationalisation of them. This spells new challenges for the prestige school as an organisation.

Did the decision makers of yesteryear confuse *standard* with *tradition*? Are the current administrators facing new challenges with young members of staff who do not understand or "buy into" those sacred traditions? Or has the time come for doing away with traditions that have been established on ideas that may be perceived to be ill-conceived.

The task at hand is a basic one. If there is the conviction that the traditions facilitate, in specific ways, the realisation of the school's goals, administrators should not have difficulty in convincing new teachers and parents of their value. As generations change, nothing must be assumed. What Raymond Hackett expressed about students (*Express*, October 09, 2007) may indeed be relevant for teachers also: "They also love schools that help them to bask in their self-esteem, and which help them to feel good about themselves."

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