

How does one pay tribute to an icon? To a phenomenon? To a woman extraordinaire? It is not easy! And the task though pleasant becomes more daunting when the woman being honoured and the institution doing the honouring are one and the same. Norma Ince Keizer and the St.Vincent Girls' High School are definitely synonymous. You simply cannot think of the one without the other.

At this point, I wish to acknowledge all the help given to me in the preparation of this tribute. Thanks to all of Norma's classmates, students and co-workers who sent in their own personal tributes which were used to create this final presentation. I will not call names but you know who you are and I know that you will also recognize your contributions. In a few instances I have quoted exact words but for the most part I have just related the views since they are views which I know we all share.

Norma Ince entered the Girls' High School in January 1948 after winning the sole Kingstown Board Scholarship from the Kingstown Methodist School. Her Standard Six teacher, a Girls' High School alumna was not surprised as she has described her in those early years as "a very bright student and an avid reader". This trend continued at the Girls' High School and her classmates have all attested to the fact that she was one of the brightest pupils in her class, always in the first or second position. She went on to achieve a First Grade Certificate at the Senior Cambridge Examination in Form Five and an exemption from sitting a Cambridge University Entrance examination when she wrote the Higher School Examination in the Sixth Form. But she was not just a bookworm for she has been remembered for the fun and laughter shared in the Sixth Form. Norma forged many lasting friendships with her classmates and even today, they attest to her loyalty and caring nature. One of her classmates sums her up in these words, "she was hard-working, unassuming and set a good example for us."

Norma never left the Girls' High School for any long period of time. After completing her sixth form studies, she was soon back at the school as an undergraduate member of staff until she left in 1956 to pursue studies at the University College of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. Those of us who joined Norma at Mona, can attest to her warm and caring nature. She played the role of big sister with ease and taught us how to cope with University life and with living in a big island. I remember vividly one of those lessons in coping. ***During my freshman's week, the second and third year students had removed all of the right foot shoes from the room of every freshman, leaving us only with the left foot. It meant that we (freshettes) would have to walk around campus wearing two mismatched left shoes. I was not prepared to do this, so I approached Miss Ince (as I still called her then) and asked to borrow a pair of slippers which she promptly and gladly loaned. I was able to strut around, unlike the other freshettes in a perfect pair of shoes. The result: I lost my mattress and had to sleep on the bare spring of my bed for a full week.***

It was not until later, that it dawned on me that my big sister was trying to teach me a lesson in learning to obey rules. She never admitted to this but when I got to know her better I knew that I was set up for an important lesson about life. It was at this point also that I got permission to drop the Miss Ince and refer to her as Norma. Perhaps that was her way of saying she was sorry for setting me up.

After gaining her Bachelor's Degree, Norma returned to the Girls' High School where she remained, except for short periods when she left to do post graduate studies, until her retirement in 1990. During these years, she climbed the ladder from graduate teacher to Deputy Headmistress and was finally appointed Headmistress in 1975. It is during this time that Norma really made her mark on the students and the school

One of her classmates thinks that it was no accident that Norma's appointment coincided with The International Women's Year. Norma was indeed an empowered woman, the epitome of a liberated woman and one who saw beyond the time in which she was living. Twice she organized the students for marches through the streets of Kingstown: the first following the murder of a GHS student, to protest violence against women; the second, to protest a protracted shortage of teachers – issues that are still present today.

Norma was the second GHS alumnus to serve as Headmistress of her Alma Mater and to date, she is the longest serving occupant of the position. Her term marked a major transformation for the school. There is no doubt that Norma broke new ground. She was a visionary and transformative leader and during her tenure the school got the Learning Resource Centre which fittingly bears her name. This centre includes the school's first modern library, science laboratories, games room and pavilion. She laid the foundation for an IT room, tuck shops and a commercial block. All of this within the limitation of the space at her disposal. Norma introduced Caribbean History to her students at a time when the curriculum was being made more relevant to the educational needs of our emerging post-colonial society and she was the first to institute the 8 period day in order to allow her students to take part in more curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

She was truly a woman of boundless energy. Others fed off this energy and were inspired and motivated by it. She was incredibly tenacious and would do whatever it took to improve the lot of her students and staff. On many occasions, her actions would meet with opposition from Ministry officials but that did not deter her. When she was told by one such official that the GHS did not need more than one science form, she forgot ignored the Ministry and, with the help of her PTA (swept along by her enthusiasm) raised funds and circumvented every road block to give her girls their own science labs, thus increasing the number of students who could study the science subjects.

All of her students remember her as a motivator. Many of them have attested to the influence she had on their choice of career, especially those who took up the teaching of history at secondary and at University levels.

But her influence and relationships extended beyond the boundaries of student-teacher. After graduation from GHS, she followed the lives of her “girls” (as she liked to call her students), and continued to mentor many along career paths. She was always ecstatic to hear of achievements in their personal and professional lives and boasted about these as if they were the achievements of her biological children.

This phenomenal woman could instill awe and fear in her students but they recognized very early in their relationship with her, that she had a passion for imparting knowledge and life lessons. She had the unique gift of being able to recognize the potential of those she taught and those who worked with her; of identifying the individuality of students’ strengths and needs (she refused to call them weaknesses). She firmly believed in giving students second chances and sometimes even third chances.

Even the *‘frequent flyers’* (as one student described the girls who found themselves frequently at the top of the landing for poor work or bad behavior) have attested to the fact that had it not been for their Headmistress they would not have achieved what they eventually achieved. Norma was known to agonize over her girls who were failing and ran the risk of being thrown out of school without the necessary skills to succeed in life. This led her to arrange for girls who were not academically inclined to attend classes at the Technical Institute where they could learn to use their hands as well as their heads. But it was not only the academics that she cared about. Among other things, she recognized the plight of those girls who had to leave their homes at 5a.m without breakfast and made arrangement for them to be fed at the Tuck Shop.

Norma had a fantastic memory. She knew all of her 600 + students by name. When asked how she did it, she confided that she always timetabled herself to teach all of the first forms so as to get to know them. Because the girls knew that she could call them by name, they also knew that they could not get away with anything. The message “Miss Keizer Coming” ran through the corridors like a wildfire whenever Norma was spotted by the girls. Nothing escaped her watchful eyes as she ‘policed’ the corridors to ensure that her girls were not up to any mischief and also to ensure that teachers were well in control of their classes. Needless to say, she angered many teachers when she barged into a disruptive class and simply took over from the teacher.

Though outwardly quiet and dignified, Norma will also be remembered for her outbursts in the staff room when she was upset about anything that could tarnish the reputation of ‘her’ school. This strict disciplinarian did not tolerate indifference of mediocrity and she could wither a

student who had stepped out of line with a look or a shriek. On the flip side we had this mothering figure, the ***Principal who, temporarily forgetting the dignity of her position, kicked off her shoes and ran from the Grimble Hall to attend to a girl who had had a cataleptic fit in the Byron Block. Students and teachers soon learned that if they wanted to see the calmer side of this woman, they would have to produce excellent classroom results and mind their p's and q's at all times.***

Norma had the same caring attitude for members of her staff. She pushed many of them to continue their education and return to GHS where they could continue to give better service to the school. She would approve study leave for members of her staff even when she knew it would cause staffing difficulties. ***In another of her conflicts with the Ministry, she went ahead and hired a much needed member of staff while the Ministry took the tedious way around the appointment. When the Ministry discovered what she had done, she was told that she had to pay the teacher. It is not clear how this incident fanned out, but I am sure Norma would have paid the teacher if she had to.***

Norma's loyalty was to her Alma Mater and her girls. ***When I returned to St. Vincent in 1978, Norma told me in no uncertain terms that I was being disloyal (she used a much harsher word) when I opted to join the staff of the Grammar School instead of the Girls' High School. I was only able to convince her of my loyalty to the school when I became Guider for 1st Kingstown (GHS) Guide Company from which she was able to draw most of her prefects and head girls.***

Her motivation extended beyond SVG. It was her loyalty, love and commitment to her school that motivated former students in New York and Canada to form GHS Alumnae Associations that continue to provide much needed help to the school. That all returning students felt the burning obligation to visit Mrs. Keizer whenever they made a trip home is an eternal tribute to her, born of the care and the loyalty she had always exhibited to her students – her girls, her protégées.

According to students and staff alike, Norma was a fair arbitrator. She treated all with dignity regardless of their social status and geographical location. She made her students to understand that even though others were different from them, no one was better than they. ***She had a gentle subtle way of first guiding or trying to make her students see what she saw in them. However, when this did not work, Norma, according to one student, 'went into gloves on, no holds barred, determined, persistent "you will" mode.'*** All of this done with her gentle voice and her enigmatic smile.

Lest we think that Norma was all work and no play, let me hasten to assure you that many of us were acquainted with her fun side. She could erupt into easy laughter and to the surprise of

many of her students she displayed a very pleasant sense of humour – a commodity that was extremely scarce among teachers of her day). She was an excellent needle woman and her eldest daughter, as well as my eldest daughter, who was born just a few weeks before Andrea, benefitted from much of her handiwork done during her free time in the staff room. She was also an avid gardener and kept a garden that was the pride of her neighbourhood. I will always be grateful to her for introducing me to the pleasures of gardening.

Then there was Norma, the headmistress, who made every effort to be neutral on sports day as was expected of any headmistress- she would clad herself in all white with a rosette equally divided in the four house colours. Sometimes she even had a special outfit created for the occasion that equally exhibited the colours representing Grimble, Headmistress, Staff and Moffat houses. Norma did try to be neutral, that is until Staff House was either in trouble, making stupid mistakes or doing exceptionally well, then the pretense was dropped as she showed herself to be, as another staff house fanatic put it , “unrepentantly a Staff House girl”. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your house loyalty, she has passed on this legacy to her daughter, the present headmistress.

Norma made many lasting friendships with those of us who lived abroad and whenever there was an opportunity, she visited in order to cement that friendship. However, she never allowed friendship to affect her professional life. ***The story is told about a particular young man, home on vacation, who found himself taking pictures on the compound without Norma’s permission. What did Norma do? She promptly called the police to get rid of the intruder only to later discover that he was a relative.***

Norma was a woman of compassion, a woman of class, a woman of substance who commanded respect from all. In fact, her superiors recognized that the name Norma Keizer was synonymous with GHS. When she should have been appointed Chief Education Officer, a position she rightly deserved, she was turned down with the words ***“What will GHS do without Norma Keizer?”*** The Ministry’s loss was the Girls’ High School gain.

There is no doubt that Norma’s achievements are many. She gave a special gift to all the young women who left the portals of GHS confident and prepared to succeed in the wider world. Her legacy lives on in the thousands of these successful, confident and caring women who have been touched, molded and indelibly branded by this icon. They are the women who are today facing challenges with confidence and grace.

As educator, administrator, headmistress of GHS, Norma brought to the job not only a passion for her Alma Mater but also a passion for the students in her care. Many will remember her as forthright but gentle, strong but kind, courageous, intelligent, a visionary who gave tone and

dignity to the GHS. Those who came after her had very little to do to add to the standard she had already set.

On behalf of the Girls' High School Alumnae, I extend sincere sympathy to her daughters, Andrea, Clare and Simone, to her sisters Shirley and Peggy and to all the members of her extended family. I know that you will all find comfort in the knowledge that Norma ran an excellent race and that she has left many footprints in the sands of time.

May this icon, this phenomenal woman, this woman extraordinary, rest in peace.