



## The BEAM Meets *Elaine Robinson*

Principal of Sir Manasseh Meyer International School

Education is a key part of Singaporean society. During the pandemic, the government has striven to keep schools open, prioritising learning above even the UNESCO recognised pastime of eating at hawker centres. Children here have lost fewer in person teaching days to COVID than in almost any other country in the world. This love for learning predates the birth of the modern city state. In the late 19th century Sir Manasseh Meyer, a Jewish trader and philanthropist, invested a portion of his wealth in a trust which gave generously to educational institutions including Raffles College. Today the same trust continues to support the Sir Manasseh Meyer International School, or SMMIS, a small, inclusive international school in the northeast of the island.

Funding alone, however, does not make a school. Since 2017 SMMIS has benefitted from the passion, drive and hard work of an inspirational school Principal. The BEAM meets fellow Brit, Elaine Robinson, to learn how her career brought her to Singapore and about the school which she now heads.

**BEAM: There are over 60 different international schools in Singapore. What makes SMMIS special?**

**ER:** Our holistic approach: the child is at the centre of everything we do, academically, socially and spiritually. We are a close knit community where everyone knows and cares for everyone else. The school is based on Jewish values but all religions are celebrated. I have been able to cherry pick the best curricula in the world: Singaporean maths, the International Primary Curriculum, Reggio Emilio for the preschool, the British National Curriculum in Literacy throughout the school. There is also a strong SEN department to support children with learning differences. And the school campus has amazing facilities: not many schools in the UK have a rooftop pool.

**BEAM: When you were growing up in the UK, did you ever imagine that you might one day live in Singapore?**

**ER:** Definitely not! I had a very typical Northern upbringing, attending a comprehensive school in Liverpool. Although Liverpool is home to the oldest Chinese community in Europe I didn't have much concept of Asia. At that time, my dreams were all about London; the culture, the museums and the diversity which I wanted to experience there.

**BEAM: Did you study Education?**

**ER:** Not initially. I read Theology and Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. It was the perfect balance, on the one hand, I studied very traditional world religions and on the other, I learned about minorities and assimilation. My MA is in Philosophy of Education.



Sir Manasseh Meyer

**BEAM: So how did you eventually move into teaching?**

**ER:** I was always passionate about education and was a youth leader throughout my teens. Then, as a young, single, twenty something, enjoying my first job in London, one afternoon in November an advertisement in the Jewish Chronicle (a UK Jewish newspaper) caught my eye. The Hong Kong Jewish Community was looking for a Youth Worker. Despite having only the haziest idea of Hong Kong's location on a world map, by 6pm that evening I had applied for the role. By January I was in Hong Kong: running leadership events for kids, organising family trips to Israel and planning heritage trips to Shanghai. As a committed pluralist, I enjoyed being able to unite the disparate parts of the Hong Kong community - the religious, the secular, the newcomer expats and the "locals", who had been in the region for many years - whilst still respecting their differences.

**BEAM: How did you find Hong Kong?**

**ER:** I absolutely loved it. I felt as if South East Asia had ignited my soul. The food, the climate, the culture, the history: I revelled in it all. It's also why, when I arrived in Singapore many years later, a part of me felt as if I was coming home.

**BEAM: It must have been tough to come back to the UK?**

**ER:** After Hong Kong, I spent a couple of years studying in Israel and that, indirectly, led me to my current career. I already knew that I loved working with young people and my intention was to continue to do that in an informal capacity. However, the organisation which had provided me with a grant to fund some of my studies felt, understandably, that they should see some return on their investment. They encouraged me to consider teaching. After accepting a role at Immanuel College, a co-educational, independent Jewish day school just outside of London, I realised that I had found my happy place.



**BEAM: What do you most enjoy about teaching?**

**ER:** It's the best job in the world. I can have an impact on a student for the rest of his or her life. I can shape confidence, inspire young people to discover who they are, set them on a path for the future. I can have a real influence on the next generation. I have a vision of how I want our world to be - inclusive, respectful, pluralistic, full of kindness and diversity. If I can create that in the classroom, the next generation will carry those values out into the world and use them to shape it in positive ways. It gives me great hope for the future. The most rewarding students can be the ones who are too often labelled difficult or naughty, such as the sixteen year old boys who are testing their boundaries. I give them respect, let them see that I understand their need to be listened to and I show them that I care. At the same time, I teach them that I expect exactly the same behaviour from them. I stayed at Immanuel College for 8 years and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

**BEAM: What did you do next?**

**ER:** I accepted a position as Deputy Head Teacher for a brand new school, a year before it opened its doors to students. The Ronson Jewish Community Secondary School in London, known as JCoSS, had already been almost ten years in the planning and I knew that its founders shared my values. It was a fantastic opportunity to be involved in the creation of a school from scratch. I developed the school ethos, wrote the curriculum, helped shape the vision which turned the school from radical newcomer into the established and highly successful player which it is today. I had no plans to leave the role but one day, whilst in a meeting with the Headteacher, I overheard his secretary telling him that someone was on the phone from Singapore with a potential job offer. He laughed and said he wasn't interested and I thought to myself, "But I am!". That was in October and by the following July I was living in Singapore, about to start my first academic year as Principal of SMMIS. I am grateful that my husband fully supported our move and that my two boys were young enough to transition easily to a new country. This time around, I already knew and loved South East Asia (and could find it on a map!)

**BEAM: What have been the best and worst parts of your Singapore career to date?**

**ER:** When I arrived, the school needed someone to take it to the

next level of its development. The opportunity to work hard and then reap results was one of the things which excited me about the role. I have a great team and together we have updated policies, improved standards and raised professionalism. We have increased student numbers from 130 to 250 and this year will see our first cohort taking iGCSE exams. All these have been amazing achievements. I also love the internationalism and especially the way my own children have had their eyes opened to the world through friendships with people from other countries. But it will surprise no one to read that COVID has been a major challenge. Leading a school through a pandemic is not something you learn in any training course. I was very fortunate that one of our goals for 2019-2020 had been to improve our online platform so when Home Based Learning hit, it only took a couple of days before everything was working seamlessly. The rest has been a crash course in grit, resilience, determination, holding my nerve and staying calm even when I want to scream!

**BEAM: What do you like to do in your spare time?**

**ER:** First I have to figure out where to find spare time in a job where the To Do List can be never ending. I'm literally responsible for everything from the pH of the swimming pool water to our academic philosophy, vision and direction. That said, achieving a good work life balance is really important to me. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, the duration of the Jewish Sabbath, I don't touch my phone. Instead I use the time for meditation, reading, yoga and other activities beneficial to my mental health. I also try to spend a lot of time with my kids and get out and about to explore Singapore. I'm the founding member of a Book Club and I'm about to start training for a triathlon.

**BEAM: You've talked about your love for South East Asia. Do you miss the UK at all?**

**ER:** Of course. I miss my Mum and the rest of my family and my friends and the changing seasons - crunching the fallen leaves, admiring the blossom, swapping out a winter wardrobe for a summer one. Sometimes I would love to take a brisk walk in the fresh air instead of a sweaty tropical stroll. Like everyone else, I've missed travelling. But in return I have gained incredible friends in Singapore and experienced new cultures and these things are priceless.

*The BEAM was represented by Rosalind Arwas*

