



# Back in the Day

Stories from our Pioneers

In conjunction with our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2011, MyAlvernia bring you the story of Mount Alvernia as told by the ones who know it best – our founding FMDM sisters. Some delightful tales from **Sister Tarcisus Leong**.

Childbirth is always an exciting time, but for Sister Tarcisus Leong, one of the pioneer batch of nuns who ran the hospital in its early days and is now retired, one birth remains etched in her memory as fresh as if it happened yesterday.

## **It was Children's Day, 1st Oct 1962.**

Sr Tarcisus, better known around the hospital as Sr Tarcie, was then working in the Labour Ward as a midwife.

The expectant mother was into her fifth pregnancy, but none of her babies thus far had made it to full term. A normal full term pregnancy lasts about 38 weeks, but this baby was only 26 weeks old and threatening to pop out any moment. In fact the baby's head was already showing. Sensing that the situation was critical, Sr Tarcie summoned the Obstetrician immediately.

Nature, however, could not wait. Before the doctor could get himself all scrubbed up and ready for the delivery, the mother 'shot' the baby out with one push. "The doctor arrived just in time by the bedside to literally catch the baby!" recalled Sr Tarcie with a chuckle.

While the delivery was successful, the situation remained dicey. "At 26 weeks, the baby's chances of survival are very low," explained Sr Tarcie. "When I held her in my hands, she was like a little kitten, only the size of my palm, with skin like jelly, revealing all that was beneath."

However, Sr Tarcie said they were determined to help the tiny baby who weighed just 596g overcome the odds. They took careful care of the infant and even had to resuscitate her on several occasions when she turned black. Their faith and determination paid off. The baby made it past the critical phase and recently delighted the sisters when she returned to Mount Alvernia for a visit and presented herself as a beautiful and intelligent lady, all grown up more than 30 years later.

## **All in the family**

Speak to former patients and the older staff of the hospital and you will discover many such heartwarming stories associated with Mount Alvernia. But the early days of the hospital in the 60's & 70's were also notable for another interesting aspect.

Back then, the hospital was managed entirely by the nuns of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM). So what was it like?

"There were no defined roles," said Sr Tarcie who is now 87. "I wore a few hats – midwife, ambulance driver, and mentor to new postulants for the FMDM order."

Mount Alvernia Hospital was, in Sr Tarcie's own words, "Like a comfortable home where everyone knows everyone. We all help each other out. We chat with the doctors, we spend time talking to the patients – it's like a big family."

## **Toot Toot**

One funny incident she remembers was being woken up at 4am to handle an ambulance case at Yio Chu Kang. She was told to stop at Lane 38 and toot her horn three times as the path was not accessible to vehicles.

"I did that for more than an hour and there was no sign of any life so we went back. After that, someone asked me if it could have been a prank since it was April Fool's Day. I laugh about it now but back then I was so angry that I said I would get even. Till today, I haven't found out."

## **Hotel Delivery**

Thankfully few abused the ambulance service, which was an important life-line for people in need of urgent medical attention. Sr Tarcie said that there once asked to head over to a 'posh hotel' because a lady there had given birth.

"When we arrived, I saw this girl sitting on a chair. I asked here where the baby was and she pointed to the bathroom," recounted Sr Tarcie.

When she went inside, she was shocked to see the baby's legs sticking out of a toilet bowl. Mercifully, the toilet bowl was shallow and the water was just around the baby's face. "His face was all blue and he was kicking away frantically," she recalled. She immediately pulled the baby out from the toilet and attended to him.

After stabilizing mother and child, the medical team transported them to the hospital where they stayed for three days. It turns out that the baby's mother was an unwed teenager travelling through Singapore at the time and she did not even know that she had been pregnant.

## **I'm back**

Then there was the case of the notoriously fussy female patient who grumbled a lot. She threatened to move to another hospital if her demands were not met. Unfazed,

the sisters told her that they would do their best to accede to her request and helped her move.

To their surprise, she came back to Mount Alvernia after spending just one night at the other hospital. “For all her misgivings, the old lady preferred the personal service she could get here,” opined Sr Tarcie.

“We spend a lot of time talking to our patients and it’s always with a smile. The point is to treat them as a person and not a patient, when caring for them,” enlightened Sr Tarcie. “The patient is very important to us and we always try to pamper them with the personal touch.”

### **Serve all, with Love – still relevant today**

Having been with Mount Alvernia from Day One, Sr Tarcie has witnessed the birth of many babies at the hospital – both literal and figurative, over the years.

Reflecting on the past five decades, Sr Tarcie reckons that one of the biggest milestones for the hospital was the handing over of the hospital administration from the FMDM to competent lay persons. “There were a lot of things that we could not do as nuns so handling the management of the hospital over to lay persons definitely helped open up possibilities for the hospital. It meant that more people could benefit from the facilities and services that Mount Alvernia has to offer.”

As the hospital has grown – in terms of size and facilities, one thing Sr Tarcie is glad to see retained is the personal touch. “It is the simple things that make a difference. A heartwarming smile, sincere conversations, a comforting cup of tea, cheerful flowers, or just treating each patient as a real person instead of ‘just another patient.’

At Mount Alvernia marks its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Sr Tarcie’s hope is that staff will continue to live the spirit of the founders. “That is to serve with love and to always keep that personal touch.”

### **Personal Musings**

*If you commit your life to a religious order, first and foremost, you have to always think about God.*

*I suppose in our life we are trained to think about God and to remember that whatever we do, we do for God and His people, which is everybody in other words. So whatever you do, it doesn’t matter. Everything is for God and His people. We don’t think about aches and pains or the hard work. We go from work to work because we are working for God.*

*-Sr Tarcisius Leong FMDM*



Today, Sr Tarcie tends to ‘babies’ of a different nature in the garden.