

MY TRIBUTE TO MY GOOD FRIEND THUTEN
28 May 2021

To Gwen, Tsering, Elizabeth and the whole family I offer and express my personal sadness to have learned about Thutens short illness and passing. My family in Wellington, the entire team of Old Boys and Girls (OGBs) from our beloved Dr Graham's Homes pass on sincere condolences including members of International Committees, the GO Committee and Mr Shane Calvert on behalf of the Board of Management in Kolkata.

I would like to share my own tribute having known and been a friend of Thuten for many years. I will speak about him during his years in India.

Thutenla was brought to Kalimpong by his father from Lhasa, and initially placed in St Augustines School. Within a few weeks he wanted to go to Dr Graham's Homes or run away, as he did many times as a young monk. With no English to start with except his native Tibetan, he soon settled into the Hart Cottage family of boys and later in Willingdon Hostel. His academic years started in the Kindergarten when he arrived aged 11 and he soon shot up over a few years, learned English to normal age group classes and made many friends, most of the students being Anglo-Indians. His sporting prowess was well known particularly in boxing, athletics, swimming and cross country to name a few. Many trophies came his way.

In his last school year 1962 Thutens leadership abilities soon saw him appointed a Prefect. After no longer able to see his family and ultimately losing his own parents in captivity – his money for school fees and living ran out but thanks to a wonderful benefactor Mr (Uncle) Bobby Crow, his school fees were met for the rest of his schooling years. He used to fondly think of Aunty Connie Wilkinson from Northern Ireland who nurtured her boys to be respectable young men. Thuten then went on to Willingdon Hostel for senior boys.

On leaving school, again through the goodness of Uncle Bobby as he was affectionately known to us, not only was Thuten able to stay at the Birkmyre Hostel but also secured a position for him to learn the printing trade. He started his apprenticeship at Hooghly Printing, both in Central Calcutta. Those were good years and Thuten was one who made the most out of life. He loved the Birkmyre dances, Trincas and many other hip joints and he made many friends. Some of them still keep in touch as we all share a special bond being "Homes Boys and Girls". Ivan and Freddie Holland and Dawn, Richard Shelverton, John Duckworth, Freddie Burns and many more that come to mind. Who could forget the drain pipe trousers, pointed shoes, skinny ties and Brylcreem – mustn't leave out the Brylcreem! Elvis, Tom Jones and Cliff Richard were the idols of the day!

Soon Thuten was seeking greener pastures and after a lot of struggles and red tape, Uncle Bob came to the rescue and former students from a bygone era, Wenty and Jesse Ferdinands, Thuten was finally able to emigrate to New Zealand being admitted as the first Tibetan refugee allowed into New Zealand in 1967.

Thuten soon settled into his new environment working with Scott Printing in Auckland. He initially stayed with the Ferdinands before getting his first flat in Sandringham. He met the love of his life Gwen at the weekly dance back then and the rest is history with his lovely family.

Among all of Thuten's involvements and achievements which others will share, he joined the NZ Committee for Dr Graham's Homes and for all these years has been our most committed and strongest advocate for the Homes as Secretary and Treasurer and later Chair and all things related to Kalimpong. This was his unique way of giving back in thanks for what was done for him.

It is too numerous to mention what he has given back and we have been privileged to see his love and commitment in many thankful ways. In recent years when we, as OGBs were advised of the shocking decline and difficulties faced by the Homes, Thuten and others set up the Global Organisation (GO) of former students and well wishers to unite and act in stemming the decline and have set goals to help not only in addressing the issues but engaging in practical work firstly in refurbishing the cottages now well over a century old but providing a blueprint for the future. Thuten was appointed one of our Patrons.

To Gwen and the family I have received many messages of concern and prayer during Thuten's illness and sadness and sympathy at his passing. These will all be passed on to the family.

Thutenla, I salute you and thanks you for all the years of friendship and love for everyone without distinction of class, creed or colour. Like many others we will miss the momos! I would add all the messages from around the world of sympathy and support you have given, now we will pick up the mantle to continue your legacy.

Love and aroha from everyone associated with Kalimpong and Dr Graham's Homes. Rest in peace my friend. We will miss you.

George A Borthwick QSM
OGB and Friend

'Father of the community' dies

Lincoln Tan

New Zealand's first Tibetan refugee and ardent Tibet advocate, Thuten Kesang, has died at the age of 76.

The Auckland Tibetan Association said in a statement that Kesang died on Sunday, May 23.

Charles Chan, 79, who had known Kesang for 25 years and attended the same temple – the Dorje Chang Institute – said Kesang suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm two nights earlier.

"We were offering puja [Buddhist prayers] for Thuten over the weekend, and his passing does come as a shock," Chan said.

"The Tibetan community here is small in number, maybe just around 50, and many consider Thuten to be like the father of the community. His passing is a very great loss."

Rinchen Dhondup, 48, a translator at the Dorje Chang Institute Tibetan Buddhist Centre, first met Kesang on his arrival here in 2004.

"You can say we shared a similar journey, leaving Tibet for India before moving to New Zealand," Dhondup said.

"From the first time we met, I knew him as a passionate – and sometimes too passionate – advocate for our homeland, Tibet."

Dhondup said Kesang was "the face of Tibetans in New Zealand" and his passing was a "huge and massive loss".

"It's like the head of the family is gone, and the rest of us are left behind wondering what's next," he said.

"Thuten was the most experi-

enced Tibetan here in NZ in every aspect, and the big question is who can even come close to filling his shoes."

The association described Kesang as a loving husband, father, grandfather and ardent Tibet advocate.

In 2017, he launched an autobiography *Tibet – The Home I Left Behind*.

That same year, a documentary film telling Kesang's story also screened at the New Zealand International Film Festival.

The film, *Team Tibet: Home away from Home*, gives an account of Tibetan culture in exile through Kesang's eyes.

"I have been through a lot in life," he said at the time.

Words fail to describe his selfless dedication and contribution to the Tibetan cause.

He came to New Zealand more than 50 years ago as the first Tibetan refugee, and for many years he was the only Tibetan living here.

In 1944, he was sent to India on his way back by his parents in the mid-1950s before the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

But during the Chinese occupation, Kesang suddenly found himself an orphan and refugee in India. He graduated from Dr Graham's

Homes, a Christian boarding school in Kalimpong, and after finishing his apprenticeship in printing, Kesang emigrated to New Zealand, arriving here on January 4, 1967.

At first he lived in Mt Albert but in later years set up home in Beach Haven on Auckland's North Shore, where he ran his own printmaking business.

He and his wife, Gwen, had two daughters and three grandchildren.

From 1967 until 2015, he served as head of the Tibetan Community in New Zealand, and then as head of the Auckland Tibetan Association until 2019.

In 1986, Kesang founded the Friends of Tibet, served as president and was the political voice of Tibet in New Zealand.

Last year, he facilitated the Tibetan language and culture weekend classes in Auckland.

Thuten had also previously served as Honorary Secretary of the Liaison Office of Tibet NZ and also representative of the Dalai Lama for the Asia-Pacific region.

"Words fail to describe his selfless dedication and contribution to the Tibetan cause," the association's statement said.

"Thuten lived a life full of passion and happy memories, always ready to sing his Bobby and songs for his soul to rest in peace and consciousness to be reborn as a person under the realm of Avalokitesvara."