



*Mrs. Norma Keizer
Headmistress 1975-1990*

Mrs. Norma Keizer's relationship with the Saint Vincent Girls' High School began in 1948 when she entered its portals as a young student named Norma Ince. Her academic career was nothing short of stellar. She had won the single Kingstown Town Board Scholarship offered to students from Kingstown who met the entry requirements for the GHS or the St. Vincent Grammar School. In 1951, when she wrote her Cambridge School Certificate Examinations, she was one of just two girls to be awarded a First Division School Certificate. In 1953 she wrote the Senior Cambridge Examinations in English, Latin, Geography, History and French. She became the first female student in Saint Vincent to qualify for entry to the University of London without having to write a qualifying examination. In 1957 she entered the University College of the West Indies at Mona in Jamaica where she read for an undergraduate degree in History, French and Latin. She completed that course of studies in 1960. In 1964 Mrs. Keizer was awarded a Commonwealth Bursary to the Institute of Education at London University to read for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. In 1982 she read for a Diploma in Education Administration and Management at the International Training Institute in Sydney, Australia. Mrs. Keizer was one of the first Vincentians to be trained as a Caribbean Examinations Council Examiner in History.

Mrs. Keizer served the school, first as one of its teachers and until 1990, for the final 15 years of her formal career in education, as its headmistress. The students of the Saint Vincent Girls' High were thus the beneficiaries of Mrs. Keizer's tutelage and/or of her guidance as headmistress for more than a generation. Mrs. Keizer taught three of the four women alive today who have held the substantive post of headmistress of the Girls' High School. She taught History to Mrs. Joye Browne and French to Mrs. Jeanne Horne and Mrs. Andrea Bowman. An animated Joye Browne described

how she and her classmates were electrified by Mrs. Keizer's approach to the teaching of history. Mrs. Keizer introduced her students to West Indian History. In so doing, she also consciously introduced her students to themselves. Mrs. Keizer was part of the early generation of Caribbean

nationalists who took it upon themselves to deconstruct colonialist concepts about the achievements, worth and potential of Caribbean peoples. According to Miss Browne, she "made history more than dates and facts". She introduced her students to the idea that they could reject versions of history which sought to deny their achievements and denigrate their worth as human beings. She "made us know that we could make history". This, in the early 1960s, was a novel and empowering concept. Miss Browne credits Mrs. Keizer with showing her the path to a liberation and self actualization which she had not hitherto imagined. The fact that Mrs. Keizer, a Vincentian woman and graduate of the Girls' High School was university trained, persuaded Miss Browne that she too was capable of attaining high academic achievement.

Another former headmistress, Mrs. Jeanne Horne has noted that when she was headmistress, she measured herself against Mrs. Keizer as the ideal standard. Mrs. Horne points to the fact that Mrs. Keizer was a forward looking headmistress; she was always seeking to add new subjects to the school's academic curriculum and in general, "to expand the reach of the school". It was under Mrs. Keizer's leadership that the Learning Resource Centre, the school's library, as well as its physics and chemistry laboratories were built. The construction of the science laboratories in particular, revolutionized the delivery of education at the school. An unprecedented number of girls chose to pursue studies in the physical sciences after the school got its own laboratories. Mrs. Keizer was also instrumental in introducing steel pan music to the school. Today, the school's science programme and its steel orchestra are arguably the finest of any secondary school in the country.

Mrs. Keizer is described by students and former colleagues alike as a soft spoken woman possessed of an iron will. The power of her glance is the stuff of legends. She is credited by her former students with the capacity to arrest the development of ill intentioned thoughts into physical deeds by a single look. She is also thought to possess a certain brand of clairvoyance. Ceadel Webb recalls that one day she committed an almost cardinal sin while walking through Kingstown in her uniform. Famished, she had managed to secure an alluring slice of cake. Having helped herself to a generous bite, she was able to swallow it, bury the remains in her pocket and regain her composure in time to greet Mrs. Keizer who cordially returned her greeting as she passed Ceadel on the sidewalk, walking in the opposite direction. Feeling safe, Ceadel reached into her pocket to resurrect her cake. At precisely that moment, Mrs. Keizer issued the quiet and simple command, "Give it to me". A traumatized Ceadel sadly gave up the remainder of her cake for dead. She was lectured on the spot. The lecture was ratified the next morning when Mrs. Keizer invited Ceadel to a private audience in her office.

Zhing Horne-Edwards confirmed Mrs. Keizer's reputation for taking no prisoners. She recalls that one morning her entire form 5 class was late for assembly. Not wanting to disrupt those

proceedings, the class conducted a full assembly of its own, singing appropriate songs of praise and praying as piously as they would have, had they joined the formal assembly. When Mrs. Keizer discovered them, she was not happy. She refused to endorse the girls' delusion that in having conducted their own assembly so as not to disturb the official assembly already in progress, they had done a good thing. They were rewarded with a class detention for their tardiness as well as their well intentioned, though ill considered attempt at making good their transgression.

Mrs. Helen Agard confesses that in her student days (when she was known by the name Helen Bowman) she, like all her peers, was intimidated by Mrs. Keizer's reputation for having an iron fist concealed by a velvet glove. When she became a teacher, however, during a very difficult period of her life, Mrs. Keizer was so generously supportive that she helped Mrs. Agard to reclaim and reconstruct her life.

Mrs. Keizer conceived her responsibility towards the school and its students as all encompassing. Nothing that affected the welfare of the school or its students was too trifling to be of concern. During the 1980s, students were concerned that they may have been unjustly accused of certain misdeeds because the schools' uniform was virtually indistinguishable from that of another school. In addressing this matter, Mrs. Keizer accepted the suggestion of Zhing Horne, then a student, to reintroduce the school tie. One student from that era also recalls that Mrs. Keizer seized the opportunity to give her a lesson in grammar when she was summoned to describe how an ugly incident between two girls had unfolded. The young lady became deeply confused when she realized that Mrs. Keizer was just as interested in hearing the account in grammatically correct English as she was in the details of the incident.

It is not difficult to arrive at a consensus as to Mrs. Keizer's contribution to the Girls' High School. All are agreed that the word "institution" is a fitting title. The only disagreement appears to be whether the article "an" or "the" should precede the title. Mrs. Keizer presided over an impressive list of "firsts" in the history of the school. Apart from her pivotal role in the construction of the Learning Resource Centre, now appropriately named after her; she was also instrumental in having the netball court paved and equipped with flood lights. Under her leadership a modern tuck shop was built and what had previously been the "cookery room" was transformed into a modern home management centre. She presided over the expansion of the school's curriculum and in order to facilitate that expansion, increased the number of hours of tutorship offered to students.

To date, Mrs. Keizer is the longest serving headmistress in the history of the school. She has been a key eye witness to the evolution of the school over 63 years of its 100 years of existence. She has been part and parcel of the progress of the school from a small colonial girls' school catering to the educational aspirations of a privileged minority, to a large robust institution instrumental in the democratization of education in an independent Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. In recognition of her stalwart contribution to the development of education, Mrs. Keizer was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1993.