

# A year of tribute to Brother Joseph McNally

**Lasalle College of the Arts has lined up activities from an exhibition to film screenings to celebrate the 100th birth anniversary of its founder**

**Clement Yong**

An idealistic arts educator, Brother Joseph McNally, born in Ireland in 1923, dedicated 37 years of his life to teaching in Singapore and Malaysia, and would buy books for students out of his own pocket.

After purchasing these for the Lasalle College of the Arts library, he would then ask his more wealthy friends for donations and financial support. This was a call they invariably answered.

"He was never very good with money, but he possessed an entrepreneurial spirit to believe and just go ahead," says Lasalle deputy president Venka Purushothaman.

"He took some calculated risks

because he had very deep social capital.

"It was a community that built a college, and he was a collector of people."

On the centenary of the pioneer arts educator's birth, Lasalle is paying tribute to its founder, who died in 2002.

Last Friday, it launched a series of year-long events, exhibitions and workshops to celebrate Brother McNally, whose name was a byword for the Singapore arts scene, "the soup in all the noodles", according to his colleagues and friends.

The activities include a marquee exhibition from August to September tracing his emigration to Singapore in 1946 as a young Irishman aged 23, as part of the Catholic teaching order De La Salle Brothers.

When here, he delved into the arts and founded St Patrick's Arts Centre in 1984, later renamed Lasalle College of the Arts.

He was also the principal of St Patrick's School from 1975 to 1982, during which he abolished corporal punishment and set up a student council and a students' parliament so elected students could have a say in school rules.

In 1985, he became a Singapore citizen and, after his retirement,

made a name for himself as a sculptor, his works showcased in a retrospective exhibition titled *Wind Of The Spirit* at the Singapore Art Museum in 1998.

In September, Lasalle will also screen *Brother Joe*, a documentary of Brother McNally commissioned by the school with support from The Ireland Funds Singapore.

Festivities will continue until May 2024.

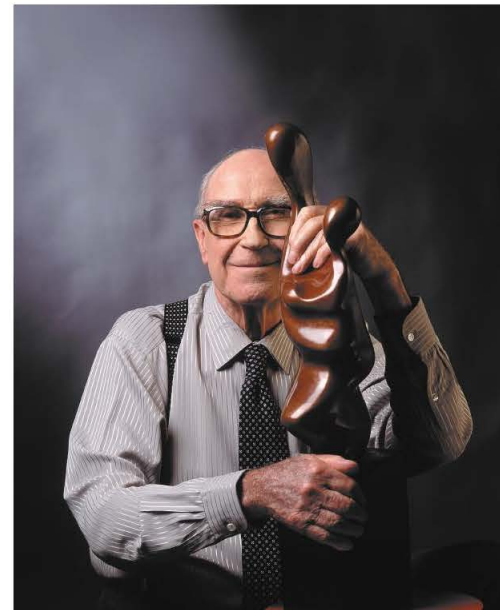
There will be two evenings of spoken word, music and literature that celebrate the cultures of Singapore and Ireland in May next year.

Dr Venka, who is the chair of the centenary celebrations planning committee, says Brother McNally was seen as "different" from the other De La Salle brothers due to his singular belief that art was good for society.

Though a brother, he could argue passionately and had a streak of defiant humour. Once, a detractor asked him when he last spoke to God, to which he retorted "more recently than you".

But his commitment to Singapore's multiculturalism and art's integrative potential led him to carve Lasalle out as a secular space.

"He was not wearing his habit all the time because the culture was



Lasalle College of the Arts launched the Brother Joseph McNally centenary celebrations in commemoration of its late founder's (above) 100th birth anniversary. PHOTO: LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

set up to be open to Muslims, Hindus and so on. He found it to be most creative when people could bring in their cultural practices to artmaking," Dr Venka says.

For Lasalle's senior fellow Milenko Prvacki, meeting Brother McNally in the 1990s was life-changing.

He was in Singapore for just two months for a design project with a German company when Brother McNally recruited him to teach at Lasalle.

His home country, Yugoslavia, was then riven by civil war, and he remembered being impressed by how informed the brother was of the crisis in his country.

"I said, 'I don't speak English,' and he said, 'You have one year,' and left. Exactly a year later, I was a senior lecturer at Lasalle and I have now stayed for almost 30 years," Prvacki says.

Brother McNally's kindness so touched him that he once thought he was "the only man I know that is successful who doesn't have enemies", although he was later disillusioned of the idea.

"In order to realise his dream, sometimes he had to be tough, even though he was always smiling and positive."

Despite the lack of a tradition of sculpture in Singapore, Brother

McNally started to produce art with the energy of a "bulldozer" after his retirement.

His use of materials mirrored his openness to cultures, and he experimented with mahogany, bronze, copper and even Chinese ink, pioneering also the use of recycled materials.

The works he created, he gave generously to friends and institutions so that "you will go to people's homes and say 'My god, you have a McNally,'" Dr Venka says. "You'll see his works everywhere in Singapore."

One of these is *Chuan*, a calligraphic bronze sculpture inspired by the brushstrokes of artist Hong Zhu An near Victoria Theatre.

Veteran diplomat Tommy Koh says Brother McNally was a believer in miracles. When asked where funding for Lasalle would come from, he looked skywards and said, "He would provide".

"The truth is that his friends and supporters worked very hard to help him find the financial support for his projects," says Professor Koh, who persuaded Singapore Airlines (SIA) to give a major grant to the college, so much so that it was renamed Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts in 1993.

In the same dismissal of concerns about money, Brother McNally would also admit artistically talented students to the college even when they could not pay the fees, to the Singapore art scene's benefit.

One such student is disabled artist Raymond Lau, who in 2001 was conferred the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council.

Prof Koh says: "Brother Joe's legacy to Singapore will never be forgotten. Lasalle is flourishing. His beautiful sculptures are on display in Singapore and in Ireland.

"But, most of all, I will remember him as a wonderful human being who loved art, who loved people of all races and faiths and who loved Singapore."

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