

Martin Khor, a friend remembers

I am unable to remember when I met Martin, but it must be in 1975, International Women's Year since that was the year I also met Noeleen Heyzer, Peter Kwok, Hoong Bee Teck, and many of Martin's friends. I might have even met him through my late husband Francis Khoo. We were a group of young graduates who got together, believing that we could, and must, make a difference to the world we live in, leaving it a better place than we found it. He became de facto leader of our little group, which never had a name.

For Martin's life achievements we can go to Wikipedia for a synopsis, and the plethora of published eulogies. He was also a descendent of an elite Penang family and never lost his Penang accent. There was so much of his life to celebrate.

But on this first anniversary, I remember him as someone who had a great sense of humour, kindness and humility. He always had a sparkle of wonderment in his eyes. Sometimes he would break into a chuckle, half-teasing when talking to some of us who might have a chip on our shoulder to put us at ease, or too great a sense of self-importance, or to diffuse a heated discussion. He was completely passionate about the environment, ethical economic development, human rights and the welfare of the millions of people less fortunate than us, especially in the developing world. He campaigned tirelessly his whole life for these issues and social justice and had paid some personal price for his stand too.

His work with the Consumers' Association of Penang and Third World Network in the 70s was way ahead of time. So when I now hear of young environmental activists blaming the older generation of having done too little for the environment, I would want them to read the archives of these organisations and the writings of Martin Khor.

He lived what he preached and wrote throughout his whole life. He was always at ease with the humble as well as the high and mighty. He was highly persuasive. He persuaded my late husband Francis to give up drinking Coca Cola! He almost got me to be a vegetarian. I just wonder if he had not been an economist would he have considered being a priest. Unfortunately I am not able to ask him now.

I owed Martin a lot. When I was imprisoned by the Internal Security Department of Singapore in 1977, he was the only journalist who wrote about it. His article came in handy when I filed for political asylum! While we were in exile, Martin constantly kept in touch, and took the trouble to visit us whenever possible.

When I learnt that Martin's cancer had spread, I flew back to Penang to see him in 2018 and 2019. Those were very precious moments with Martin and Meena. Martin despite his condition was still working hard – far too hard, writing policy statements, advising civil society groups despite being very tired. He was still advising the South Foundation from Penang! He even tried to persuade me not to join the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza, and said that this kind of thing was for the younger people - plus I had never learnt to swim! "Why not spend the time writing a book – that will be more useful! If you need a quiet place to write, you can use our flat. No one will disturb you here." That was the kind advice of a dear old friend. His Penang hospitality never faded. "Swee Chai – have you forgotten

our food? Meena brought this specially for you. You must eat more and sleep more. There is so much to do”.

The visit in 2019 was difficult. I had just had surgery for a ruptured appendix and had 10 days of powerful antibiotics through a drip to clear the septicaemia (blood poisoning). But Peter, Bee Teck and I knew that we must see him and booked ourselves into a tiny hotel nearby so that we could walk to his apartment at anytime. His energy was fading, and he could only be with us an hour at a time. He was also in pain. But he wanted to see us too. He was still optimistic and the Martin Khor smile was still there. Evelyn came too. When I said good-bye to Martin, we knew we will only meet again on the other side of the river. Soon afterwards, back in my London hospital, I received the news that he had finally won the battle against pain and suffering. He died peacefully.

Martin remained a statesman, a writer, an activist, and a fighter to his last days. It is an honour to be his friend. It is easy to say we will continue his work, but his act is so difficult to follow.

Dr Ang Swee Chai 29 March 2021