

# QUEEN SOLOMON

*As a student, SHARON SOPHIE SOLOMON battled boredom in the classroom. As an educator, she battles for children's rights in learning. By LAUREN TAN*

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NAPPA LEATHER BLOUSE AND WOOL PANTS, BOTH CELINE. COMET DIAMONDS SET  
IN WHITE GOLD NECKLACE USED AS HEADPIECE, CHANEL JOAILLERIE

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HIS IS NO ordinary morning at the Learn Different Academy. It is “Fun Day”, the last day of school before it breaks for the summer holidays. Instead of Math or English lessons, there is trampoline jumping, body art tattooing and pizza feasting. “It’s not what we usually feed the kids,” says the school’s founder,

Sharon Sophie Solomon, the

moment she sees us. “It’s homemade,” she adds, as if we would have tipped off Jamie Oliver’s school lunch police if it wasn’t.

A progressive private school, Learn Different is Solomon’s vision of education: a place where children, who would otherwise be considered as outliers or troublemakers in the mainstream classroom, are challenged, nurtured and empowered.

Since opening its doors in 2008, the school has expanded its programme from kindergarten level to its current intake of students up to primary three. An International Primary

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Curriculum (IPC) accredited school, it offers an inclusive learning environment that recognises the science of teaching through measuring grades, but also considers the human element to learning.

“What we’re seeing now — the kids just having fun and enjoying themselves — you wouldn’t have seen when they first started [at *Learn Different*]. They would have been inhibited and reserved,” says Solomon as we stand, paper plates in hand, watching some of the students expend their youthful energy chasing after a ball.

Aged five to 10, some have learning difficulties such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Asperger’s Syndrome and dyslexia, while others are so gifted they “can’t even measure their IQ” reveals Solomon, who is in her early forties. All attend the school for the simple reason that Learn Different, with its

admirably low student-teacher ratio — officially put down as six to a teacher, but in reality is about four or five — is one that tends to both a child’s socio-emotional and academic needs. Every student is taught in the way he or she learns best. And the concept of rote learning? Thrown firmly out of the window. “At the end of the day, it’s about looking at social emotional needs before the academic side of things. Let’s say you are down and out. Do you think you can be productive at work? No,” she explains.

If ever there needs convincing that these “special needs” kids can have the genius coaxed out of them, then look to the walls. One is covered with *baikus*, limericks and couplets written by the kids in English class. Another is taped with Chinese brush paintings assisted by *lao shi* (Mandarin for teacher), and yet another is decorated with winged-like contraptions inspired by a teaching module on Leonardo Da Vinci’s flying machines.

“This is not a school built for what teachers can do, but for what our children can do,” she states, arms sweeping out to corral students and staff for a quick end-of-semester photo at our request. No wonder that the mood is totally celebratory. The kids entertain the camera by throwing their arms around the teachers and vice-versa. And each time our lensman counts out: “One, two, three, yay!” Everyone throws their hands up in the air as though they were on an amusement park ride. It may just be the moment, but the atmosphere is electrifying.

When all is done, one child walks to a corner and starts crying. He’s upset because for the next two months, there will be no classes. “This is a school I would have loved to attend,” Solomon leans in to whisper.

Learn different is, in many ways, borne of Solomon’s own personal journey. “It began with me, the outlier in school, the one who was nearly every teacher’s nightmare,” she says of her secondary school experiences. Although a voracious reader with a thirst for information, she found it difficult to stay focused in a large classroom with educators who delivered lessons like cookie-cutter drones. What grated on her nerves was the fact that there was always only one acceptable answer to many of the questions posed: “Something just wasn’t working. I was bored and so easily distracted that even a fly in the corner would get my attention.”

“I realised that there had to be a school out there for me. I couldn’t be that dumb,” she says. So unknown to her parents — dad was a civil servant and mum was secretary to then



WOOL CAPE, MARNI

COTTON DRESS, WOOL COAT  
AND HAT, ALL BY MAX MARA.  
WHITE GOLD EARRINGS SET  
WITH DIAMONDS AND FULL  
DIAMOND J12 WATCH, BOTH  
CHANEL JOAILLERIE.



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Cycle and Carriage managing director Chua Boon Unn — she did her research and started the application process to an Australian boarding school while in secondary four. But it wasn't until receiving dismal grades for her GCE 'O' Level preliminary exams (even in her pet subjects of English and Literature) that she plucked up the courage to tell her parents what she had done. “Showing them my results was the only way to get them to see that maybe there was something wrong with me, that I just didn't belong in the local schools,” she recalls.

Jolted, her parents flew with their only daughter to Perth, Australia before she could even sit for the 'O' Levels. “But when we got there, the school I had applied to turned out to be nothing we imagined. That's when they packed me up again and we flew to Sydney where they got me into a private Jewish college. My mum said: ‘That's it, you don't have a sense of identity, you need Judaism,’” she shares, even though religious identity was the last thing on her mind.

At Masada College in Sydney's wealthy North Shore, the class sizes were small, while the teachers covered the subjects in depth and brought out the best in each student. “I could ask questions and explore. It was there that I realised the joy of real learning,” she says. At 15, she was finally attending a school where she found a voice. Combined with newfound independence from living on her own (in a rented apartment with her landlord's dog), Solomon hit her stride.

Her long-held dream to become a war reporter “on the field, being the eyes, ears and voice of everything”, also looked set to be realised. (Having only brothers, she had grown up playing the board game Risk and always had a ready supply of the military magazine *Jane's*.) In Sydney, one of her essays, a piece on science fiction, won a writer's award administered by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, gaining her a cadetship at the top newspaper. When asked what she wanted to do, she said: “War reporting”. But her parents, who had witnessed the horrors of World War II, caught wind of her ambitions and promptly brought her home to Singapore.

Their plan, instead, was for her to get a diploma in education and enter teaching instead. “That turned out to be a safer option. It was there that I found my own “battle” — to

save kids who get unfairly left behind,” says Solomon who is currently working towards a master's degree in education.

In addition to Learn Different, her overarching battle plan also involves arming all children with a love for reading. In partnership with the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, she set up its first ever library catering to the dyslexic reader. That was a decade ago. Today, through the Learn Different Academy and the Ronald McDonald House Charity, of which she is a member of its executive committee, she is creating a library for the new wing of the National University Hospital paediatric ward set to open later this year. Fully committed to sponsoring and maintaining this library, Solomon hopes to reach out to the chronically sick children and their families.

Although she married young and well — husband Jacob Isaac is the son of Hilda Isaac of the famed Orchard Road luxury boutique House of Hilda's — Solomon has chosen to answer her calling as an educator for unique learners. The reason? She had witnessed kids “nothing short of smart” lose interest in school, one too many times. “I was beginning to see the real picture,” she says.

Fresh out of college and armed with a diploma in education, Solomon first taught preschool before moving on to the upper grades at an elite primary school. She saw how the kids were, as required by the local education system, able to read by age five and to add and subtract by six. But unfortunately, their socio-emotional needs were being glossed over and play time was few and far between.

Looking for new challenges, she obtained a transfer to teach the humanities in a neighbourhood secondary school, where it wasn't long before she realised what she had gotten herself into. “Here I was, for example, in the midst of bringing history to life to a classroom of impressionable teenagers, and a police officer would step in to ask for a student.” The first time the law enforcers came round, she was taken aback, but soon became used to its regularity. “That was when I gave myself a silent mandate. I wanted to be where these kids were and reach out to them,” she says.

Yet it wasn't until later while sitting in on a class and witnessing a teacher reprimand an eight-year-old for



PHOTOGRAPHY / SIMON SIM PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT / FELIX LEE

smashing his spectacles out of frustration that she was roused into action. “When I picked up his exercise book later, you could tell that he was struggling with writing. And here was an educator being reactive to the immediate behaviour and not stopping for a moment to think about what was triggering this poor boy’s frustration,” she recalls. “It bothered me and it piqued my curiosity.”

That was when she returned to university to study psychology and understand the non-obvious but powerful cognitive challenges some students face. “That was to lead to something far more satisfying,” she says.

For the next decade she taught in private clinics, clocking in easily more than 40,000 hours working with diverse learners. From there, the vision for the Learn Different Academy and its two support arms Integrated Therapy (providing occupational, speech and art therapy) and Learning Support (supporting students in math, language and literacy, science

and Mandarin) was formed. Entirely self-funded, the third generation Jewish Singaporean established this without a consultant or even a business plan. Everything was based on “unpredictability and plenty of desire”.

While it may be that the children she encounters through her work and at school are her “heroes” for their “courage, resilience and achievement”, it is family and her two kids Saacha-Rosa, 19, and Aaron, 21, who are the gravity that keep her grounded, says Solomon.

Saacha, who has just graduated from college, and Aaron, who heads off to an overseas university in the fall, have their unique way of showing what they think of their mum. “Saacha leaves me Post-its and sends some of the most beautiful text messages that make you stop what you’re doing and realise that you have a number one fan out there despite your flaws,” says Solomon. “And Aaron admires what I do but he gives me



*“[MY HUSBAND] IS MY ROCK AND I GIVE HIM PLENTY OF CREDIT FOR MANAGING MY COMPLEXITIES AND OUR DIFFERENCES. HE USED TO WONDER WHY I DO WHAT I DO. BUT AS HE’S SEEN THE STUDENTS GROW AND STARTED READING ALL MY REFERENCE BOOKS, HE NOW GETS THE BIGGER PICTURE. HE’S EVEN DIAGNOSED ME AS HAVING ASPERGER’S AND ADHD — BECAUSE I’M NOT SOCIABLE!”*

reality checks with the usual ‘you can’t save the entire human race’ lecture!”

Both have been active volunteers in all of Solomon’s projects and are familiar faces at Learn Different. It was Saacha who took charge of the body art tattooing kiosk during the school’s Fun Day, while Aaron helped out at a recent faculty gathering. “If ever I need a hand, they’ll be the first ones to come running,” says Solomon. “Of course there have also been times when I was told ‘This is child labour, mum’ when they were growing up. But that never stopped them from helping out and making a difference.”

Husband Jacob Isaac, who has diverse interests in solar energy R&D, yachts and property, is also a director at Learn Different and sits on its academic board. The pair has always worked side by side, whether it is she trying her hand at making bagels when they brought in a bagel company, or he being the listening ear to her ideas for revolutionising education. (Both husband and wife also bring their knowledge and experiences to the Manasseh Meyer School — Singapore’s only Jewish day school. He as a member of its Board of Trustees and she as a member of its executive committee.) “He is my rock and I give him plenty of credit for managing my complexities and our differences,” says Solomon. “He used to wonder why I do what I do. But as he’s seen the students grow and started reading all my reference books, he now gets the bigger picture. He’s even diagnosed me as having Asperger’s and ADHD — because I’m not sociable! I’m not the greatest at schmoozing and cocktail talk.”

Work aside, she is most comfortable in the great outdoors. It began with horse riding as a teenager and continues on today through her passion for falconry (“Never make eye contact with a hawk because it’ll gorge your eye out”), trekking and mountain climbing (“I like reaching the summit, whether it is braving the heat or extreme cold”). It is one of the reasons why she has started the search for larger grounds for the fast expanding Learn Different, so her students will have enough space to run freely and take part in sports with nothing between them and the blue sky.

Hailing from a creative family — Jacob is a painter while her brother Eli Solomon is a writer and photographer — Solomon also indulges her artistic side by collecting art. The most significant of her collections is a 30-strong assemblage of Australian Aboriginal paintings by first to third generation indigenous artists such as Wukun Wanambi, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri and Bessie Nakamarra Sims. Many of these paintings can be seen hanging in the corridors of Learn Different.

But it is her collection of photographic prints, chosen for their subject matter and of which she has far too many to display, that provides the best insight to Solomon, the crusader of inclusive education. She says: “I love the beauty of black and white imagery because it trains the human eye to see without prejudice.” ■