

## Give and take

By Karen Tan

**An octogenarian tells KAREN TAN the way to be healthy and at peace with oneself in the golden years.**

SUZANNE Lee is an accomplished, charming lady. She is an expert ballroom dancer and a good shot, and even had her own pistol when firearms were not banned. And she is 82.

Originally from Seremban, Suzanne came to live in Penang when her husband Tony, 83, a former superintendent of police, retired. Over tea – a gracious affair with homemade pancakes and tea – Suzanne shared her secret of her marriage to Tony, happiness and good health.

Childhood sweethearts, they have been married for more than 58 years and are looking forward to celebrating their diamond anniversary in two years' time.



Suzanne Lee, 82, exercising with a 1kg dumbbell in each hand.

“Tony is a gentleman and very considerate,” declared Suzanne who affectionately refers to her husband as “Daddy”.

She does not believe in keeping secrets from him – why complicate life? – and does not interfere in his life, either. One cardinal rule she has maintained all these years in her long happy marriage is the concept of “give and take”.

“We have been happy for so long because when one of us is angry, the other stays calm. Besides it’s normal to quarrel so long as you don’t go to bed angry!”

Amid the splendour of her large cosy home filled with her collection of antiques, this mother of three is also no stranger to tragedy. Just five years ago, she buried her only son, Gordon, who died of liver cancer. He was Asia’s first haute couture model in Paris.

For a moment, Suzanne gazed into space and became solemn, at odds with her usual animated vivacity. “It broke my heart when Gordon died. Until now, I cannot attend funerals. I remember too much the pain and sadness. Gordon was a very loving and kind son.”

Having spent much time worrying and losing a lot of weight over Tony’s safety when he was a police officer during the communist insurrection, and witnessing her son’s illness and death, Suzanne has evolved her own perspective of life and happiness.

“Life can be unexpected and throw you for a loop, but what’s certain is God and His love,” said Suzanne, a devout Catholic. “I pray many times a day but it’s not much use if you cannot say the words ‘I forgive you’ and ‘I’m sorry’.

“I know it’s not easy when you’re angry at someone. But if you do not forgive, you’re not going to be happy and at peace,” she added.

Looking at her remarkably youthful and peaceful face that was devoid of powder – she uses only moisturiser plus lipstick and eye-shadow – Suzanne has clearly lived by her own credo.

“I am happy and, praise God, Tony and I have many friends who visit us and drop by to chit chat. We like company and we have many friends.”

She added, with a cheeky sparkle in her eyes, “They keep us young and active!”

Clearly, the youthful couple have a very strong network of friends and support. In fact, many of her friends are from her church, the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, where Suzanne is easily the oldest choir member who also helps out as a cantor, someone who leads the singing during Sunday mass.

At her comfortable semi-detached home, Suzanne showed me the type of exercises she does to maintain her svelte and trim figure.

“I keep in shape by doing push-ups – twice a day, 10 to 20 push-ups each time.”

Suzanne’s flexibility, agility and slim figure put many women half her age to shame. For exercise, Suzanne keeps fit by doing basic arm movements, climbing the stairs two steps at a time during her “workout” and also carrying 1kg dumbbells. But paradoxically, Suzanne does not believe in sweating, so she stops her exercise whenever her heart beats very fast.

“I believe in moderation,” she smiled.

But then, this lady also eats two scoops of ice cream every day and a small piece of macadamia nut chocolate every night – her only vice, she says.

She also believes in eating normally from a wide variety of cuisines and cooking styles – from deep-fried to steamed food – but everything in moderation.

“Every morning, I have a big glass of fresh juice – it’s a combination of celery, carrot, apple, miniature bitter melon and pears,” she added.

Breakfast usually consists of one slice of toast, ham and an egg – yolk and all – and a cup of white coffee.

Three meals a day, and a glass of boiled water every hour, from morning until 6pm – and no snacking in between meals.

“The first thing in the morning when I wake up, I recite the Rosary. It’s also the last thing I do before I sleep. I consider myself very lucky and blessed. I thank God every day for the many blessings I have,” smiled Suzanne.

Being grateful and having an appreciation of God’s bounty – Suzanne is clearly a very happy 82-year-old, at peace with herself and the world.