His kids never spoke to him in fear

A JOKER, a boss-buddy, a family man whose children's classmates called him "uncle".

Clearly, it's the many private faces of the late Wee Kim Wee that really define who he is.

His easygoing nature and concern for the average Joe, said NUS academic and former Nominated MP Ngiam Tee Liang, started at the most appropriate of places: His own home.

"It was in 1967. I was 18. One of his daughters was my classmate in Victoria School, and he and his wife invited us for a class gathering at his place," recalled Associate Professor Ngiam, 56.

Although they were just a group of teenagers, and Mr Wee was a top manager at The Straits Times, "he didn't speak to us like an intellectual snob", Prof Ngiam added.

"He was very friendly and personable. You could see that he was a loving father, affectionate with his kids, very 'manja' with them. In fact, when his kids spoke to him, it was never out of fear."

Ex-journalist and now public relations consultant Violet Oon, 55, remembered one occasion in the early '70s at the Times House canteen, just before Mr Wee was due to retire as ST's Group Editorial Manager.

Ms Oon was then a young reporter at the now-defunct New Nation.

Mr Wee walked by with his lunch tray, she recalled, sat down next to her and simply said: "I don't know what to do with the rest of my life."

Said Ms Oon: "That's just symptomatic of how modest he was. Because look what great things he DID accomplish with the rest of his life."

Diplomat. Ambassador. President.

Mr Kirpal Singh has fond memories of Mr Wee's visit to a Sikh temple.

"It was very prophetic," she added. Another person who has sat next to Mr Wee on more than a few occasions was writer and SMU lecturer Kirpal Singh, 56.

Associate Professor Singh pointed to the late president's "celebration of human diversity" as one of his key qualities that's often overlooked.

So much so that SMU's Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies was renamed the Wee Kim Wee Centre in August 2002 — with Prof Singh as founding director.

"When he visited our Sikh temple in 1987," Prof Singh recounted, "he would take off his shoes and sit cross-legged on the floor with all of us, rich or poor, to join us for a communal meal. The proceedings were in Punjabi, but he didn't mind."