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Friendship, fun and games at great reunion

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"IT'S good to be amongst friends". Now this is a dictum I've never truly understood until I became a member of Writers Bloc.

Our relationship with each other and also with our facilitators is something so special it has to be experienced to be believed.

After what seemed like ages, we finally had a reunion, which I might add was not unlike a high school get-together.

Familiar voices talking all at once as we entered the NST Training Centre followed by joyful hugs and shouts of pet names.

There were the faces I've often longed to meet again now that I'm studying at a university abroad. Thank God almost everyone came, except the outstation members. But hey, Indra came all the way from Kuantan.

Now that we have Writers Blocs I and II, our friends have increased and my address book is almost full.

For me, at first, most of the Writers' Bloc II members were strangers as I haven't met them since I missed their training camp last year. But by the end of the day, we were just one big family.

Our three facilitators - Rose Ismail, Aishah Ali and Fatimah Abu Bakar - began with an introduction as to why we needed to touch base.

A short recap on newswriting brought back memories of the good old times of our training workshop at Port Dickson almost two years ago. There they were at it again - and they hadn't lost an iota of the enthusiasm they had then. They reminded us of why we became writers in the first place, just in case we had lost sight of it.

The first of our guest speakers was Sharaad Kuttan, a social activist from Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram), an organisation dedicated to voicing the opinions of minority groups in Southeast Asia.

Sharaad made us realise how much we could contribute to society by being aware of issues affecting us. Relating his experiences of working with the downtrodden, he made us realise that things may not be what they seem.

Next came Tina Abdullah, the writer of the Ties That Bind column. She is a training and personal development consultant with TRW Consultancy.

She started us off with a game on non-verbal communication skills. She told us how important it was to really know what we wanted in life and how to achieve our goals.

Shouts of "I want to be rich" and "I want to be famous" were heard echoing across the room. But such statements were not enough. We needed to clearly define what success was in concrete and specific terms such as "I want a million ringgit" instead of just "I want to be rich".

Tina also taught us that everything in life had a price although sometimes you can't define that price in monetary terms but rather in diligence, creativity and effort.

Finally, we have to pay that price, in other words, take action.

For things will not change unless we ourselves change. A simple formula, yet its profoundness cannot be overemphasised. Thank you, Tina.

Tina then distributed circular cardboards which we were supposed to pass around to our group members and get them to write their names and phone numbers on them. Well, she saved the boys a lot of trouble and embarrassment. Thanks, Tina.

Makan time! As if any Malaysian gathering can be complete without a makan session. And as usual, the NST did not disappoint us at all. The food was fantastic. What was even better was that the ice was beginning to

break.

Bloc I and Bloc II members were now speaking to each other and the conversations were not just awkward introductions, mind you. There were already jokes and an air of familiarity. This was a welcome relief from the almost shy atmosphere present earlier.

A short spell in public speaking was next. We were asked to come up to the front one by one to introduce ourselves to the crowd.

The laughter and the friendly name-calling were still abuzz but now we were friends and we got to know each other better.

I'm proud to say that Soul Street - four young men who sing beautiful acapella - namely, Fariz (from Writers Bloc I), Zain, Wana and Damian (from Writers Bloc II) are our very own.

You never know how famous they are as they themselves never tell you. But wait till you hear them sing! They mesmerised the crowd with their rendition of Hard to Say I'm Sorry, Yesterday and (my personal favourite) It's So Hard To Say Goodbye To Yesterday.

They were joined by Hafidah Samat of the Life & Times entertainment desk who thrilled us by singing Ning Baizura's Curiga.

Then came rapper Johan "Coneydog" Ishak who sang Crossroad and then, with Soul Street and Hafidah, belted the new cover version of Every Breath You Take.

Games. Everyone couldn't wait to be kids again. To get us into groups, we played this clever Family Game. We were given pieces of paper on which was written a name.

If you had "Marina Mahathir", you better look for members of the PM's family. There were the Kennedys, the Sideks, the Simpsons and so on.

We played fun games like the Kim's Game in which we had to remember the names of things after seeing them for just two seconds. The games were fun but what amazed me was that even though there was a spirit of competitiveness among us, sportsmanship was even more apparent.

Time passed in a blur. No one wanted the day to end but it inevitably had to. We gathered in a circle, strangers no more. Rose, Aishah and Fatimah came around and hugged us one by one. And we hugged each other as well!

Hours earlier, we didn't even know each other but now we were hugging each other like we were old friends. What kind of magic was this? It was almost as if a spell had been cast over us.

But if it was a spell, I don't think any of us minded. We were intensely happy. New friendships had been forged (hopefully long-lasting ones). Now even the names Writers Bloc I and II were no longer applicable. We were Writers Bloc, pure and simple. Hey, it's good to be among friends.