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Giving the children their best

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"THIS is the second best thing for my wife and I," said Velu Subbiah, who together with wife Kamalavalli, is one of five winning couples for the first NST Parents of the Year 1997 award.

The first best thing, he adds, was "when I achieved my ambition of becoming a ferry captain".

Velu and Kamalavalli, of Bukit Tengah near Bukit Mertajam, were nominated by their only daughter Kanageswari. The couple also have three sons.

Kanageswari, who wrote her letter in Bahasa Malaysia, had spoken about the love her parents have for each other despite a match-made marriage and how, throughout the years, have been models for her and her brothers to emulate to make a success of their lives.

"Father was a sailor but went up the ladder with determination. He worked for the Penang Port Commission," she says, adding that his motto was "Work hard first and enjoy the fruits later."

However, she says, despite his long work hours, "he would help us revise when we had exams. Seeing him so determined gave us the confidence to do well. It was not easy. He raised all four of us initially on a salary of RM200, but he was never stingy.

"Mum," she adds, "was the perfect support for him and would not give in to temptations" like keeping up with the Joneses, not even requesting for things like much needed new furniture.

Kanageswari says "our family success is reflected not in material wealth but in the wisdom and good values they have passed on to us.

"I treasure the times when we would all sit in front of the TV, complete with titbits, watching a live badminton or football match that featured the Malaysian team. The feeling of patriotism was nurtured in times like these."

What has Velu got to say to all this?

At an interview at their home, he spoke of how he had to quit school at age 12 so that his siblings - he's the eldest of three boys and two girls - could continue with their education. He helped supplement the family income with many odd jobs. At 24, he took up a job as labourer with the Penang Port Commission.

A few years later, after marrying Kamalavalli, the young couple vowed to "do our best for our children," determined that their offspring will have a better life.

Velu, now 60, recalls that although life "was not so terribly hard then, it was never smooth-sailing either."

After a few years, he was promoted to deckhand. A strong believer in the I-can-do-it-if-I-put-my-mind-to-it school of thought, Velu set his sights on becoming a ferry captain. "Many thought it was wishful thinking, especially when I did not have the qualifications. However, my perseverance paid off," he says. "I was promoted to ferry captain in 1979," a post he held for the next 14 years.

A check with the PPC showed that Velu was the first and only Indian ever appointed to the post. Velu is, however, quick to note that "I owe this success to my wife."

"She was the driving force. She knew we had little then but had the foresight that we could improve our lot if we do it together," he says, pointing to Kamalavalli, 53.

Also calling her his "source of strength and inspiration," he adds that "after we got married, I told her of my ambition and she got very excited and lent the necessary moral as well as financial support.

"I'm not embarrassed to say this, but my wife pawned her jewellery to support our young family then. Kamalavalli often stayed up till the wee hours to ensure that I went through my notes."

Often, she reminded him that all his toil was for the family "She's always placed importance on our children. And she still reminds us that all our sacrifices would pay off if we do them for the right reason."

The housewife had to juggle between the needs of her young children and making sure that her husband achieved his ambition. "She has never neglected our responsibilities to the children, ensuring that they are well-fed and receive adequate education."

A reserved Kamalavalli, for her part, describes her husband's strong desire to improve the family's fortunes as "our greatest asset."

"We are always together through thick and thin. Whatever we decide on, we will pursue the matter together and would never give up easily," she says.

Every parent should emulate Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, she adds. "The Prime Minister and Dr Siti Hasmah also had very humble beginnings, but never neglected their family. And they had also sacrificed a lot for the country.

"I had always wanted to be a teacher but being a girl, customs then dictated that I should not study any further.

"Given the circumstances, I believe we have not done too badly for our children."

Later, one of Kamalavalli children's whispers: "My mother has the greatest respect for Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah and one of her greatest wishes is to invite them for lunch at the house someday."

The couple is thankful and happy that their children can "take flight" on their own now. The youngest, Subbiah, named after Velu's father, is a technician with a Japanese multinational in Singapore, while another son, Arumugam, is a marketing executive in Ipoh. The eldest, Sivananda, realised his mother's dream of becoming an educationist and is teaching at Sekolah Kebangsaan Bukit Gelugor in Penang.

Kanageswari, their second child, is an assistant nurse at Penang Hospital. "I have also always wanted to participate in the NST Mothers of the Year tributes in the past but never got around to doing so," she wrote in her nomination letter.

"This year, when NST included both parents, I decided to give it a try to share my thoughts on my parents and their experiences in bringing us up.

"We are now better off. Times are better, thanks to father's hard work and mum's support. There is so much love in the home. I am now 30 and studying to be a nurse. I hope to make it through to staff nurse to sister. If my dad could do it, so can I."

No wonder Velu and Kamalavalli smile a lot these days. They have done right by their children. And that includes 11-year-old foster daughter Neo Hui Ting or Dacheni (named after a Hindu goddess), whom Velu and Kamalavalli took in when she was two days old.

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