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## Hand-in-hand for abused children

Muharyani Othman

THOUGH much has been talked about the fate of abused children, there is still no one special place that can house them.

In most cases, abused children are either kept in hospitals while they recover from their physical wounds, or in children's homes where they do not receive the kind of special care they would need to help them cope with their trauma.

It is, therefore, with much pride that the Child Abuse Care Centre in Johor Baru, the only one of its kind in Malaysia, was launched recently, where for the first time a non-governmental organisation has combined efforts and resources with the state government and a big corporation in setting up the centre.

It is a shining example of how smart partnerships can work to the best advantage in the social welfare arena.

It is due to the close cooperation of Juita (Association of the Wives of Johor State Assemblymen and MPs), State Welfare and Social Services Department and the Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor (PKRJ) as well as the generosity of corporate citizens, that the centre is taking shape now at a site between Jalan Mariamah and Jalan Petrie.

For months, members of Juita have been working hard to raise funds for the centre which is being constructed by PKRJ. The association will also be responsible for the smooth running of the centre which requires more fund-raising activities, while the State Welfare and Social Services Department will provide the staff.

When it is open in January, the centre, which is under the association's Juitaku Sayang III project, will be able to accommodate 150 children.

Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, who is also Juita's patron, early this month laid the foundation stone for the project which will cost RM2.5 million.

At the third Langkawi International Dialogue recently, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke of smart partnerships as the way forward, not just in the economic field but also in the social and political spheres.

Smart partnerships have indeed led to the incredible transformation of Malaysia on the way to become fully industrialised in the next millennium, thus enabling her to serve as a model for other developing nations.

"In Johor, we've been putting this smart partnerships concept in all our projects with support from the relevant Government agencies and private sector," says the Menteri Besar's wife, Datin Professor Dr Jamilah Ariffin, who mooted the idea of setting up the Child Abuse Care Centre.

"We have common goals in all our Juitaku Sayang projects, that is, to help those who cannot help themselves on their own and whose misfortunes are beyond their control.

"As a non-governmental organisation, we have the ideas and leadership but we don't have the funds, while the Government agencies can provide the staff and expertise though, again, they don't have the funds. The private sector on the other hand can provide the funds, and at the same time they are contributing to society. It is a win-win relationship, as what is to be gained in smart partnerships, as extolled by the Prime Minister."

Jamilah says Juita's ultimate vision is to create a caring society which is sensitive to the needs of others, especially the less fortunate, through its social work.

The idea of setting up a child abuse care centre for Johor struck Jamilah in 1995 when she was giving away Deepavali hampers at the Taman Sinar Harapan Jubilee Home for mentally-retarded children and adults.

During a tour of the home, she noticed that abused children, including those who were sexually abused, were also placed in the home pending the outcome of their court cases which could take as long as three years.

Babies abandoned by their parents at birth were also housed at the home in the same wing with a group of severely mentally-handicapped inmates.

The stimulation a child receives in the first three years of life is crucial to mental development but Jamilah wondered what kind of stimulation the infants could get at the home as the setting was totally unsuitable for them.

As for the young victims of physical and sexual abuse, she thought they needed special care and counselling to enable them to overcome their trauma and build up their self-esteem and confidence.

She wanted all these children to be housed in a proper shelter that provides a homely atmosphere such as comfortable rooms and landscaped gardens and other important facilities, including professional supervision and guidance.

Among other things, the centre will house the administrative offices for the welfare officers and staff involved, a waiting room, a counselling room and a recreational area where the children can watch television and indulge in group activities.

There will be a nursery, a play area for indoor games and two separate wings for boys and girls, a library, a reading room and study areas so that the children's schooling will not be disrupted.

Juita, which will have its administrative office and meeting room at the centre, will also be setting up a 24-hour hotline to enable members of the public to lodge complaints of child abuse or neglect, and to get advice.

The three blocks of buildings making up the centre will be connected by paved walkways lined with flowering plants to provide a conducive atmosphere for both staff and the children.

Next to the centre will be the shelter for victims of domestic violence. It is an old Government building that has been refurbished and will be open soon. These two shelters will be sharing services provided by the Government agencies involved in order to save costs and resources.

While Juitaku Sayang I and Juitaku Sayang II projects involved the setting up of day-care centres for disabled children in all the 40 State constituencies and the setting up of libraries in the hospitals' children's wards respectively, Juitaku Sayang IV provides training of child minders.

Juitaku Sayang V, through its healthy living concept, is aimed at improving public health and the target groups are the poor in the kampungs, Orang Asli settlements, estates and new villages.

Activities for Juitaku Sayang VI through the Gaya Hidup Indah concept, with participation from the private sector, involves the setting up of parks and gardens with a corner reserved for a taman bunga Juita.

The association is now into its Juitaku Sayang VII project, which is aimed at building a disciplined, knowledgeable young generation of Malaysians with vision.

One of the activities is the setting up of reading corners in all the eight orphanages in the State.

By the time it has reached its next target - the old folks homes - Juita would have covered all groups of citizens who need that extra help so that they are not left out of mainstream development.

Indeed Juita has set an example for other States - thanks to smart partnerships.

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