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A life devoted to rehabilitating addicts

HE was known as the "father of all gangsters and dadah addicts in Penang" in his younger days.

But over the last 15 years, Osman Bilal has devoted his life to treating and rehabilitating dadah addicts.

"I was in my early twenties then and committed all the vices. I started with drinking, then one day a friend asked me to try heroin and eventually I got hooked on it," recalls Osman, who used to roam the streets of Butterworth, locally referred to as Bagan Luar.

"I became scrawny and scruffy. My clothes were in tatters and I slept everywhere including under bridges and on five-foot ways. In the cool nights, I covered myself with a cardboard, and one morning I found a dog sleeping on top of me," he adds with a chuckle.

Whatever money he earned from fishing, he spent on dadah.

In 1983, he was convicted of dadah abuse and was sentenced to 16 months jail in Penang Prison. He was jailed three more times for dadah.

It was only after he and his wife had their first child that Osman, of his own will, stopped this habit and joined a religious group to give him mental strength.

Osman says he got the idea of setting up a treatment and rehabilitation home for dadah addicts after the fish they caught and left in their boats overnight were stolen by dadah addicts from the area.

The Kuala Muda village community took a serious view of the problem and indicated their support for his idea.

He rented a hut near the mosque some time in 1984 with a few addicts where work was supervised by the Umno division. Within a year, the number of addicts grew to 13 with the USM's Centre for Policy Research also providing food and moral support.

"However, some villagers wanted the home closed for personal reasons, but I did not close it down because I saw there was a need for it."

Osman and his people then moved to a shoplot next to the mosque with the initial financial support coming from USM. With some 50 residents, the home became self-sustaining from the mid-1980's.

Osman says news of the existence of the home started to spread far and wide and it received increasing numbers of addicts.

However, in 1993 Osman was arrested for running an illegal home for dadah addicts seeking treatment and rehabilitation but the charge was dropped.

In 1995 with more than 100 residents, they had to move to bigger premises at the present site, about 150 metres away.

Given the name Rumah Sahabat Insaf (Home of Repentant Friends), the home continued to operate without any interference from the authorities until last month when Osman and 139 sahabat were arrested by police.

Born and bred in Kampung Kuala Muda, Osman has a small concrete house in the village, just about eight metres away from the RSI's kitchen.

He spends his time in the village in the day and in the evenings, returns to his family home in Bukit Kechil, Sungai Petani, about 40 minutes' away.

He says a number of former residents of the RSI have married and continue staying in the village with their families. Most fish for a living.

"To some of the sahabat, we were relatives as their own families

discarded them. They had no money and had to depend on the kindness of others.

"At least 10 died here. When they were too ill to even walk, the others carried them whenever nature called."

He rates the success rate of the RSI at more than 50 per cent, but regrets that his recent arrest and the Press reports regarding the police raid on the RSI and the arrest have tarnished his image.

"I was abused by some of the parents who had come here to take their sons away. They accused me of possibly providing dadah to those under my care and operating a home when allegedly knowing that it did not have a permit."

He says when addicts came to the RSI, they would be searched and queried about their intentions and whether they were police cases.

"We had turned down some because we did not want the RSI to be treated as a shelter for escapees. Anyway, the police would come and get them if they knew they were 'wanted' cases."

For his work, Osman received recognition and commendation certificates from the Selangor State Government (for treating and rehabilitating many addicts from the State), Pemadam Penang, Penang State Islamic Council, and the Home Ministry (signed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was Home Minister then).

On the flip-side, he had also been the victim of poison-pen letters.

About 30 of the sahabat who remain at the RSI today are still continuing their religious activities.

Osman says treatment formed only a small part of the RSI's activities, as addicts can kick their addiction in a matter of a few days after drinking the daun biak decoction.

The bigger and more important portion of the programme has been rehabilitation through counselling, motivational talks and religious activities to give them mental strength, so that they continue saying "No to Dadah".

And this is done in an open, home-like environment as opposed to a heavily regimented concept.

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