

08/07/1999

Our teenage high achiever

Hanizah Hashim

IT is not easy being young but when you are gifted with an intelligence which surpasses your peers and astounds even adults, growing up can be downright painful.

Zenaida Sofia Salih Lowe hates being referred to as a "gifted" child but there is no other word to describe this teenager who learnt the alphabet all by herself at the age of two.

It was nothing really. She just punched the letter B on the keyboard of her father's computer and a chirpy little bird would appear. So she kept punching more letters on the keyboard.

This method of learning through curiosity continued throughout her 16 years of life and Zenaida is now teaching herself the Linux operating system and "dabbling" with web development.

Her inherent curiosity led this former student of SMK(P) St George in Penang down unorthodox paths, much to the astonishment and at times cynicism of teachers and friends.

When she decided at 15 that she wanted to go to university, she surfed the Internet and downloaded application forms of several Tier One universities in the United States.

She refused to divulge her ACT and SAT scores but it was good enough to get her admitted into Vassar College, The College of William and Mary, Tulane University and Dartmouth College.

Let's get to know what makes this young girl tick because it's not every day that you get to meet a 16-year-old who knows exactly what she wants to be - an astrophysicist.

For starters, she hails from a family of achievers. Dad is former Universiti Sains Malaysia dean of postgraduate studies Datuk Dr Vincent Salih Lowe, mum is former director of USM's Archeology Research Centre Datuk Professor Zuraina Majid.

Brother Juarez, 26, a law graduate from Bristol University, is a legal assistant with a law firm in Kuala Lumpur. A high achiever himself, Juarez prefers the limelight to be on his sister.

Further probing gleaned that at the age of 14, he qualified to be a member of Mensa, an international society for people with high IQs. This got a ribbing from Zenaida who feels IQ tests don't truly reflect one's ability.

The warmth and affection of this close-knit family spilled out during the interview which was peppered with laughter as each tried to outdo the other with a witty joke or comment.

Doting dad Lowe said: "The alphabet episode at the age of two took place when her mother and I were in Harvard for our sabbatical leave. Zenaida later attended the USM Tadika in Penang. The Tadika director Datin Gaik Ogle was a mathematics graduate who became a nursery school teacher out of her love for children. She spotted Zenaida's abilities at three, took us aside and told us our daughter deserved special attention. After that, we made sure Zenaida had every opportunity to explore her interests."

Lowe credits his wife with much of the children's upbringing which brought a quick retort from Zuraina who said Lowe often came home loaded with educational toys and books.

She said: "We are all avid readers and buy books whenever we go overseas. We even had to give Zenaida our credit card number so she could order books via the Internet."

"It may seem rather surprising but Zenaida pretty much taught herself by reading novels and academic books way beyond her age level.

"Her buddy, a USM computer science student, used to answer all her questions until he exhausted even his resources. She was given access to the Internet at 11.

"She used to be active in swimming and still manages to play a game of squash daily. Her life has been pretty much like all girls her age because we sent her to Government schools.

"It was better for her. We always remind the children to strive for the best and to be humble. We have great fun when we are together," said Zunaida with a maternal smile.

Unlike other 16-year-olds, this accomplished pianist, school debater and 1996 recipient of the State and National Tunas Jaya award happens to be writing her first science fiction novel.

How does a person so young have such a diverse range of interests? Well, this is the Internet generation we are talking about and the world is at their fingertips.

A Star Wars aficionado, Zenaida is interested in space exploration. She even attended a Nasa space camp in Florida when she was 11 and has read the works of Steven Hawkings.

She said: "I chose to accept the offer of early admission by Dartmouth College because it is the most computer-connected campus according to the US News and World Report.

"I am already in contact via e-mail with some of the professors at the Department of Physics and Astronomy who have been prompt in replying. I would like to do research in astrophysics."

Has school been difficult for such a precocious child? Yes, she said there were times when she would get bored in classes where the teachers did not welcome her questions.

But she was quick to add that there were teachers who gave encouragement and who were patient with her inquisitive nature.

But there were also unkind remarks that hurt.

"Children today are different. We are not as gullible. School is not the only channel to get an education or to access information. We realise teachers are human and have faults too. My friends and I respect teachers who know their stuff and make a real effort. If they don't, students will walk all over them. I suppose I am every teacher's nightmare."

Zenaida would like to begin her studies in September because she has already got a place and does not believe in having to wait another two years to complete her SPM.

Her dream is to carry out the kind of world-class research that could one day win Malaysia the Nobel Prize hoped for by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In an article she wrote in 1996 for Computimes, Zenaida said: "I am happy to have been born in the IT era. I would have missed so much without IT. Through gaining keyboard skills and computer literacy, the entire vista of knowledge is open for me, preparing me earlier and faster for the world of adulthood and work."

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