

21/01/1999

Warming to a new role

Sharon Nelson

SHE was called the iceberg.

At the Federal Establishment Office (FEO) where she worked more than 30 years ago, her colleagues thought her arrogant.

It didn't help that she was naturally quiet.

So it was probably inevitable that the result was a haughty and distant public image.

"I'm a very private person," says Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of newly-appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Unfortunately, she says in mock exaggeration, her seeming sternness becomes all the more obvious when she stands next to her husband who is always smiling.

That she has an identical twin sister, who is often mistaken for her, has also contributed indirectly to the don't-mess-with-me image.

"Those who know me then think I am stuck-up because my twin sister doesn't respond to them," she says.

We are talking in the cool comfort of her lounge four days after her husband's appointment. The air is thick with the scent of flowers - well-wishers and hopefuls alike have sent hundreds of bouquets to their house in Jalan Bellamy, Kuala Lumpur.

This is Kak Endon's (she prefers this to her honorific) first interview with the Press after the appointment. Although she chats amiably as she draws a mental picture of her life with the man who is now second in Government, she does seem a trifle nervous.

"I never expected to be a politician's wife," she says. She certainly did not bargain for the life that was ahead of her. Only upon marrying Abdullah did she notice his deep interest in politics. Soon, people were coming to the house at "all times of the day", which bewildered the young wife and often reduced her to tears.

Gradually though, she grew to accept her husband's choice of career. And his open, amiable nature, took effect by making her more sociable.

"Now I find it nice to have people around."

"I am so thankful to PM for promoting Pak Lah," she says. "I see that people are happy and I know they are not pretending. We pray to Allah and thank him for the blessings."

His new position will also mean a change in role for her, one which she is still trying to digest.

"It's frightening," she says. "I don't know what to expect."

For one, she will now have to play an active role as vice-president of Bakti, the association of minister's wives headed by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

"I admire the First Lady greatly. I can learn a lot from her."

If Kak Endon has one aim in the ambit of her charity work, it is to do something significant for children. In part, this has already been realised.

After a visit to North Korea in 1996, she arranged to bring paintings to Kuala Lumpur to sell and raise money for North Korean children.

But her heartfelt wish is for a children's hospital here, "one that would cater to their every need."

In a wistful voice, she says that she herself would have liked more than the two "God has blessed her with".

Her 32-year-old son Kamaluddin trained as a lawyer at Cambridge and is now married and in business.

Nori, her daughter, turned 23 last week, and is doing her final term in international relations and political geography at Syracuse University in the United States.

But further blessings come in the form of Kamaluddin's own two children. At the very mention of Alya, 2, and Arif, nine months, Kak Endon's face breaks into pleasure.

"Oh, did she sing for you?" she asks, her attention turned to an obviously irresistible topic.

At 58, Kak Endon makes a glamorous grandma. The eldest in a family of 11, she was born and educated in Selangor.

Her late father, Datuk Mahmood Ambak, was a government servant turned businessman, and the first chairman of the Malay Chamber of Commerce.

Her mother, Mariam Abdullah, is Japanese.

"She's one in a million. Do you know she still calls me to say 'thank you' when I send her things?"

Family is everything in the Abdullah household. Despite nearly eight years in the Foreign Ministry, the usual pictures of handshakes with various heads of government are absent.

Instead, every flat surface is crowded with wedding photographs, family portraits, and photographs of children and grandchildren at various stages in life.

"Abdullah has never neglected his wife and family. That's why I feel I should give him all the support I can," she says.

But in political circles, where hypocrisy can get thick and acrid, it isn't always easy.

Difficult times visited the Abdullah family in the late 80s, when Pak Lah made his now-famous decision to join Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Datuk (now Tan Sri) Musa Hitam and challenge Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's leadership.

Soon after, he was dropped from the Cabinet until 1991. Another grim moment came two years later, when he lost his post as one of Umno's three vice-presidents.

But those years turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the family.

"We found out who our friends are."

"Sometimes," she says, re-enacting her despair, "I ask him why he chose politics."

His reply, moulded upon his gentle view of religion, is unchanging.

"He says that to serve the people and the nation is also to serve Allah. Just talking about religion doesn't make one a good Muslim.

"He is very mild-mannered, and so patient that you feel tested. Sometimes, I feel like punching him!"

Indeed, his approachable nature makes it easy for people to ask for help. Some offer lots of money in return.

"He just tells them that all those ringgit notes will not be able to hide the shame on his face if he accepts.

"If they try to go through me instead, my question to them is: Do you want to keep his friendship?"

Most get the message.

The interview is about to end. The woman in front of me has warmed up so much that I am brave enough to ask her how she and Pak Lah met.

"Oh, it was at the FEO. I was secretary to his boss.

"I'd be having my morning coffee, he'd just come and sit down like a busybody, and say hello."

Later, he would tell her how surprised their colleagues had been that he managed to "break the iceberg".

No prizes to him, though.  
Because really, it wouldn't have been such a tough job.  
(END)