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Ready for some action?

Sharon Nelson

IN the heart of the Sungai Way industrial area, there stands a cluster of sandy-brown low-cost flats, their decades-old edges now turning black.

Piles of rubbish form a boundary round the carpark, and though there are a fair number of people about, the general air is one of listlessness.

But in the Pusat Penjaja Selera Sukom next door, the tempo is in sharp contrast.

The third floor houses the headquarters of the Civil Action Bureau (Biro Tindakan Sivil), a new service-providing body in Umno.

On this Monday morning, 10 women from the area have gathered for an aerobics class. As the music blasts from a portable stereo, the women move to the demanding beat, some confidently, some gingerly, but all with purpose and determination.

The exercise programme is the first project to be carried out by the bureau, which many say gives Umno - a party often accused of being indifferent - a welcome, approachable face.

"The location of the premises is deliberate," says Azalina Othman Said, Supreme Council member and bureau head.

"There are 35,000 warga industri (industrial workers) in this area. The level of earning is low and there is plenty of crime and other social problems.

"What kind of recreation can they afford? We provide a place where they can fill in their free time constructively. And exercise doesn't just make you fit, it puts you in a better frame of mind."

Says 29-year-old Nor Azizah Hanim, a factory employee with Western Digital:

"I used to be active in sports at school, but not after I started work because there was no time. But now this place is nearby, so there's time for me to come.

Twenty-five-year-old Suzie Linggang, who works with Toko Industri, agrees.

"This is the first time I have attended a fitness class; they were all too far away. This is so near my house."

Before this, leisure time was mainly spent watching TV or frequenting shopping centres. Now, both women say there is an affordable, convenient alternative.

"It gives (one) the feeling that Umno cares about young people and teenagers," says Nor Azizah.

The bureau was launched on Oct 18 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"The establishment of the service centre is a good move as it provides service to the rakyat which is the responsibility of a Government elected by the people," he said in his speech that night.

"I want to bring the party to the people," says Azalina, who is also a syariah lawyer, in a later interview.

"Everything we do goes back to our motto - kami prihatin (we care)." She seems to have got off to a reasonable start.

The day after the launch - which was attended by over 7,000 people from around the area - the bureau swung into action.

The aerobics sessions are held from Monday to Friday, either two or three times a day, and cost RM5 each. If you work in a factory, you pay a reduced rate of RM3. All classes are taught by professionally-trained

instructors from the Ladies' Fitness Centre in Shah Alam.

Also on offer are weekly taekwondo classes. For RM3 a go - compared to the market rate of RM15-20 - men and women can learn the art of self-defence. The response, say bureau members, has been "excellent".

Counselling and legal advice are available by appointment, and part of the centre's 12,000 square feet has been sectioned off into a training room. Here, professionals will be invited to hold talks about the merits of education, for example, or the dangers of sexually-transmitted disease.

Perhaps most useful of all services is the complaints section which appeals on the complainant's behalf to the body in question.

So far, because the flats next to the bureau headquarters are soon to be torn down, many of the complaints have had to do with finding new, affordable accommodation.

Even non-Malays have dropped in, with one former Indian national seeking help to get Malaysian citizenship for his son.

Already, many are calling Azalina the new Michael Chong, in reference to the man who runs the immensely popular and much-used MCA complaints bureau.

"Eventually, if I can, I'd like to have a similar bureau in all the states," she says.

"For now, we'll do a project in a different state every month. This month, it's going to be a blood donation drive in Perak."

All programmes carried out by the bureau will be subject to a six-month review. "If it's not working, we stop," she says.

So far, no Umno money has gone into the running of the bureau; all expenses are covered by private sponsors.

Azalina is also determined to ward off the sluggish hierarchical order which can overtake any organisation.

"If you head something, it only means you have more responsibility, not privileges," she says.

As bureau head, she herself is at the headquarters at least once a day, interviewing staff, meeting those who drop in, and planning future projects.

And, at her insistence, all those holding posts in the bureau must exercise to keep fit.

Talk about building up the party's muscle.

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