

10/09/2000

Young men who aren't afraid to take on the world

Ahmad A. Talib

JIN Teh and Kafee Ahmed are modern day adventurers. While still in their early 20s, they have journeyed far and gained a much wider perspective on life.

They have never met, but their paths may cross in the future as they claim their heritage from their fathers.

Jin is a 22-year-old Malaysian employed by Motorola, one of the biggest telecommunications giants. Motorola was set up in 1930 and started making radios for automobiles. It went on to build two-way radios in the 1940s, semiconductors in 1950s, and then invented the pager.

Motorola also has operations in Malaysia. It started in 1972 in Petaling Jaya. In the last few years, at one of its American plants, the company has developed the two-way pager and is now developing prototypes for its 3G (third generation) architecture. To give an indication of its operations worldwide, Motorola last year chalked up global sales of over US\$30 billion (RM114 billion).

I met Jin at a dinner hosted by the Malaysian Club of Chicago last weekend. The club was formed in October and is registered in Illinois. Among its objectives are to promote the personal and professional development of the Malaysian community in America and to sponsor and support activities that enhance the cultural awareness and perception of the community.

The dinner was held to mark Merdeka Day and coincided with the visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Chicago. Jin is with Motorola's Texas operations and works in the Supply Chain Rotation Programme in the semiconductor products sector.

"I don't know how long I'll be here but I reckon I can benefit from the experience. I got a job immediately after graduation. I did my internship with Motorola for three months when in campus. So after I graduated they offered me a full-time job. I'm thankful for this," said Jin.

Jin is from Kuantan where his father is an insurance agent. He typifies some of today's youngsters who are not afraid to take on the world. They seem more able to make adjustments to their lives, and staying alone away from their families is not difficult at all.

In the old days, youngsters were always encouraged to merantau (seek knowledge in faraway places) and return to their villages only after they have obtained enough ilmu to serve the community. Not all youngsters who left and returned contribute positively to the community but most did as they have gained more wisdom and become more mature in their outlook.

Jin could very well be one of the wiser ones. For someone so young, he sounded mature enough with his head firmly on his shoulders. The young man wants to return to help his family and contribute to the country. Jin seems to know exactly what he wants and looks confident enough to achieve the targets he set for himself.

As for Kafee, the lad is from Hyderabad in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. I met him by chance in Chicago. I had heard of a place called Penang Restaurant and wanted to try its fish head curry and kangkung goreng belacan. After a few days without Malaysian food, Penang Restaurant was the answer.

I hailed a cab and driving it was Kafee. A short question-and-answer session revealed that the young man is a student at a Chicago university pursuing a degree in computer science. He is 24 and drives a taxi to

supplement the funds needed for his education.

"I drive this cab every day when there's a semester break. I make about US\$100 a day and this is good money. To make that kind of money, I need to drive long enough to cover the rental for the cab which is US\$45 a day, and gas (petrol) takes another US\$20 or so. If I work hard enough, I can make enough money to finance my studies. When university opens, I drive three or four times a week."

He stays in a rented apartment with two other friends. The rent is US\$800.

"Aren't you afraid driving the cab at night?" I asked. "Well, I pick and choose my customers. If I feel they are troublemakers, I drive away. I keep to certain safe routes. Of course I can never be certain but so far I've been lucky. Alhamdulillah ..."

How does he manage his time between studies and driving a taxi? What about friends and parties? And girlfriends, after all Kafee is a handsome Salman Khan look-alike.

"I come from an orthodox Muslim family. I take my religion seriously. I came here to study and intend to go back to India and work in the Indian Silicon Valley. There's a lot of opportunities there. I don't want to jeopardise my studies by having girlfriends and enjoying life here.

"My father was stationed in Kuwait many years ago. My brother is in Kuwait, working as an art director in an advertising company. I expect to finish my studies in about one-and-a-half years. After that I'll be ready to work."

Such is Kafee's determination that one is compelled to wish him "good luck". Here is a young man so focused and determined in his life, one who has his head firmly on his shoulders and his feet on the ground. With the kind of money he makes just driving a taxi, Kafee can afford to pop in at any of Chicago's jazz and blues clubs and enjoy life. But, no. Instead, he sends about US\$500 a month to his family in Hyderabad.

I hope Jin and Kafee cross paths one day. Both have the qualities that are needed to face today's challenges - determination, unafraid to seek new knowledge no matter where and how, willing to ride the tide of globalisation, focused in their aims, not easily distracted and courageous enough to chart their own course through the universe.

(END)