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A driving force

Caroline Yap

AS a college student, Aishah Ahmad, now general sales manager of Ford Motor Co, never once thought her first job would involve selling and marketing trucks and heavy vehicles.

She is clearly tickled pink as she recalls her initiation into the motor industry.

"I had to deal with all the tauke-tauke and there would always be a breakdown in communication," she shakes her head in laughter.

However, she took it in her stride and saw it as an opportunity to show that she could succeed even in the most unlikely places.

Her spirit to take the challenge has seen her rise to the top to be the president of Persatuan Otomotif Malaysia (formerly Malaysian Motor Traders Association) and chairwoman of the Automotive Federation Malaysia. She is also the first Malaysian and the first female president of the Asean Automotive Federation, and she organised the KL International Motor Show 2000, which had critics nodding approvingly.

She presents herself in such a gentle manner that you are amazed at how she has managed to survive in such a testosterone-filled industry.

She attributes her independent streak to her father, who pushed her with a kind heart to where she is today. Though some may say that he was tough on her, he felt that as an only child she shouldn't be spoiled, she said.

"On my first day of school he brought me to class and then left me to myself."

While other parents peered through the windows in concern at their children, she got through the day unscathed.

He was a significant role model for her. She describes him as "a very fierce guy but generous in character". He died in 1989 and her mother has stayed with her since then.

Which brings us to what she feels is her greatest achievement. "People say that I am a very good daughter," she says with a smile. It is clear to see the pride she takes in this.

Of course, she isn't one to wax lyrical about her contributions to the associations that she heads. She says it was a thrill for her when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad invited her to be a member in the Second National Economic Consultative Council earlier this year.

"It was the first time they have sought feedback from the motor industry," she says.

During the last five years in Ford, she has seen it moving from seventh to third in terms of motor vehicle sales in the non-national category. A satisfying achievement indeed for her.

In 1999, her outstanding performance in her work was noted when she was awarded the Tokoh Alumni Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara. She was the first woman to receive it.

Although she has taken to the industry like a car to the highway, it was not a conscious choice on her part. Rather, it was a succession of events that started with her studying the Chartered Institute of Transport at ITM. Only three out of the 40 candidates passed that course. She was the only successful female candidate.

A stint in Inchcape during her final year helped propel her into the industry. She was one of 15 undergrads who were chosen to train as executive cadets for a month. After that, she was offered a job but they admitted not knowing where to put a woman.

The road she travelled has landed her in the industry she now loves. "It was by chance that I got into the auto industry. I ended up there and enjoyed it," she says.

However, at the beginning of her career, she had to bear the less-than-friendly attitudes of some subordinates. She was not allowed to use the executive toilet and was given economy-class airline seats when she should have been getting first class.

It was a case of her having to prove herself to others. It's something she no longer worries about because she has done more than just prove herself worthy of respect.

She says: "It's something you earn, not something you can ask for."

Although she gives her all to work during the week, her weekends are jealously guarded.

"They are so precious!" she says. She enjoys staying at home watching TV and reading books.

Her recipe for success is independence, hard work, dedication and making sure she does a good job in whatever she does.

"You have to be committed to the job, give your best, get along with people and be good at teamwork," she says.

Taking her turn at being a role model to others, she hopes that she inspires others with what she has done.

"From what I hear, people think that I am good boss but because I am hard-working, everybody down the line has to work hard."

It has its rewards as people witnessed at last year's motorshow. As the chairwoman of the organising committee, she says she was really tough on her team.

"I believe in pushing them to make sure that at the end of the day everything is well run."

She says, though, that female bosses are "more caring about welfare and family. They tend to be more concerned".

Although she makes it a point to help others out in terms of career development, she's not one to help a woman for the sake of helping her out. Rather, she feels strongly in rewarding good work.

She believes women still have a lot to fight for.

"I don't know if I have helped but the very fact that I head these associations shows that women are able to perform. We are capable," she says.

As all others caught up in stressful jobs, she has her way to handle the pressures of life.

Her strength to manoeuvre through frenzied days lies in her finding time to pray.

"I consider religion very important, especially to get through the ups and downs in life. You feel good after prayers."

With this on her side, she doesn't have trouble being inspired in her life. Besides, her love for work keeps her engines revving, which explains why she never has to jump-start herself out of bed.

Satisfied with where she is, she does have a few more things she wants to accomplish. She plans to cook up a storm, do some charity work and travel, this time for her own enjoyment.