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A passion for perfection

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IT'S a demanding industry but Zarita Noordin, the group general manager of Pernas Hotel Management, can't imagine doing anything else. Ask her if she ever suffers from stress and you can expect a look of disbelief followed by a burst of dismissive laughter.

"Of course I do. All hoteliers work under tremendous pressure and have high stress levels," she says.

"We have to meet deadlines, respond to people quickly and find out what the customer wants. It's tough but I enjoy all the challenges."

Her passion for the hotel industry is unmistakable. The drive that has kept her going for 27 years is still as strong as the foundations of Mutiara Kuala Lumpur Hotel - the old KL Hilton, the first international hotel in the country, recently bought over by Pernas Hotel Management.

She may thrive under pressure but she is quick to point out that she is by no means a calm person.

Explaining that the speed of decision-making in her job helps her to think fast, 52-year-old Zarita says that she is addicted to the multi-faceted exposure that it brings.

"I can be meeting investors one minute and addressing associates the next," she says. "Problems of all sorts crop up constantly, no day is the same and the rapid pace keeps me stimulated."

"It's not just a job, it's a lifestyle," she continues.

"People you meet at work are the same ones you socialise with. Unlike other jobs where you meet and part on an impersonal basis, the people you interact with in the hotel line become your friends and remain so, especially patrons."

It was by sheer accident that she landed in the service industry.

A graduate of Universiti Malaya majoring in Anthropology/Sociology, she worked at the Employers Provident Fund as a group supervisor before joining KL Hilton in 1974 as an assistant public relations officer.

She then worked her way up to become the regional public relations manager for Hiltons in Malaysia.

After switching to human resource, training and industrial relations, she was promoted to rooms division manager in 1990.

In 1996, she left Hilton to join Pernas Hotel Management as general manager, service apartment division. A year later, she was promoted to group general manager.

For her, dealing with stress is the easy part, as she has the ability to switch off once she gets home. Her drive for perfection, on the other hand, is something she not only demands of herself but also from her staff.

"I always tell those who work under me - if you've worked two hours on a task, why not spend another five minutes to make sure it's perfect?"

Besides her emphasis on quality, Zarita attributes her success to her blunt and forthright attitude.

"If you take on a job, you must be accountable, sincere and committed. You've got to be upfront and honest about everything, even if it hurts. At least, at the end of day, you have nothing to hide and can look someone in the eye."

Contrary to what people may think, Penang-born Zarita denies that she had to make any personal sacrifices to get where she is today.

Explaining that she and her husband, who is presently managing a hotel

in Mecca, have no children, she says that she only wishes she had more time to devote to social work.

"Other than that, I don't think I've had to sacrifice much because I thoroughly enjoy what I do."

While she feels that she hasn't given enough back to society, her achievements in the hotel industry should be an inspiration to the young.

However, this modest woman does not consider herself a role model.

"Oh no, I don't see myself that way at all. We have so many women doing well out there. We have so many female engineers and architects who have won awards. I think I'm quite average."

Drawn to people with diplomatic and social skills, Zarita says she has many role models. A big fan of the Prime Minister and his wife, she says that she admires a person's qualities rather than achievements.

"I look up to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad because he is a charismatic leader and I think Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali does a great job of fulfilling her duties as his supportive wife."

Surprisingly, as one of the leading hoteliers, she doesn't consider herself competitive and believes in setting her own standards.

"It is all within your control. Aim for the level you want and set specific measures and ways of achieving it."

Admitting that it was never money that motivated her to excel at work but career fulfillment, Zarita doesn't believe in getting to the top too fast.

"When you're already at a high salary scale, you can't move very far and so it limits your opportunities. It's better to take your time and enjoy what you're doing. However, when you reach a point when you're not learning anymore, it's time to move on."

In addition to having a productive career, Zarita gets inspiration from a loving family and a close-knit group of friends.

"When I'm not working, I spend time with my family. I'm very close to my parents. Mum and Dad are my guiding light. As kids, my siblings and I were allowed to express our opinions so long as we observed proper decorum. My friends, too, are important to me as I've known them for some 25 years."

She continues: "Success is a complete all-round experience - enjoying what you're doing, being happy with your life, earning enough to buy what you want and knowing that hell is not really your place should you sleep and never wake up."

Finally, what is her vision for her company?

"We've given ourselves a target of five years to be on the international scene. Some people say we're very ambitious for a young company but I think we can achieve it. The Mutiara name is relatively new but it's been around a few months now and we want to be recognised as a brand. We have the portfolio and the necessary material to back us up, so I hope we can get there before I retire."

Sceptics might raise eyebrows but this is one woman who is determined to make it happen.

"After all, what does it take to make a good hotel?," she asks. "First of all, you must have a very clean hotel, facilities that work, service that is efficient, and staff who are friendly."

Can she achieve all this?

"Yes," she says with quiet confidence.