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Siti on a roll

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A SISTER to many, a mother to all. That perhaps best describes Datuk Paduka Siti Saleha Mohd Ali.

At a ripe age of 77, she is as effervescent as ever, both in manner and the way she deals with people. A grand old lady who has survived a brain tumour and breast cancer, she wills her past and current achievements to God.

Siti Saleha thanks the Almighty for enabling her to play her roles as daughter, wife, mother, grandmother and politician. However, two other roles are equally close to her heart - as educator and charity worker. Thus she is executive chairman of HELP Institute, governor of Sunway College, adviser to the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute Malaysia (Asli), and chairman of the Handicapped and Spastic Children's Association and the Selangor School for the Deaf.

'This is all very much the product of my upbringing and early family life. In fact, all my nine siblings have contributed to the development of this country in their own ways,' she says jubilantly.

Siti Saleha received the award of 'Mother of Scouts' in February 1992 for her work as adviser to the Boy Scout movement.

The award reminds her of one amusing incident. 'I was giving advice to the Boy Scouts in Melaka when my brother-in-law (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) paid me a visit. Arriving at the place, he asked the boys, "Mana ketua? (Where's the leader?)." They all pointed up at a tree - where I was!'

Needless to say, Dr Mahathir was taken aback. 'Apa kak buat sana (What are you doing there, sister),' he demanded, and she nonchalantly replied, 'Giving the little ones some advice.'

Siti Saleha says Dr Mahathir was not very pleased - 'He was worried for my safety.'

This energetic woman was also the first to be included in the National Archives 'Women in Malaysian History' list. Is she honoured? 'Of course, but let it be buried there,' she says. Pressed further, she laughs. 'At that time in the early 70s, there was probably no other qualified women.'

Delving into her childhood would shed some light into this vibrant personality. 'Although the eldest girl in the family, I was regarded a tomboy,' she reveals. 'In the family, Jameah (Siti Jameah) was the beauty while Hasmah (Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, now wife of the Prime Minister) was the mischievous one.'

Certainly no pushover, Siti Saleha wasn't one to play with the 'normal girlish stuff'. She took to the outdoors easily, joining her brothers in football and kite-flying. She was also an active sportswoman and was captain of the badminton team at St Mary's Girls School in Kuala Lumpur.

Sunway Group adviser Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam remembers her as 'a dear old friend from the good old days'.

'I was schooling with her brothers in Victoria Institution and I used to visit the family back then.' He describes Siti Saleha as an exceptional woman with 'plenty of energy'. He is particularly struck by her liberal approach towards both the young and the old, irrespective of race.

Another noteworthy trait of Siti Saleha, he adds, is her 'lateral and radical thinking'. 'That's because her family, especially her father, the late Mohamed Ali Taib, had an intellectually open mind.'

Both Siti Saleha's father and mother Khadijah had a great influence on

her. Her father was the Official Assignee at the Estate Duty Office who later became legal adviser to the Terengganu State Government in 1952. 'His emphasis on education was profound. That is one reason none of us in the family was a school dropout. I remember when we were growing up in Klang, we went to school seven days a week - English school from Mondays to Fridays and Malay school during the weekends. In the afternoons we attended religious school.'

Her mother played no lesser role. She was, Siti Saleha says, a remarkable woman who taught herself to play piano and who loved to read. 'She was the one who encouraged my sister (Siti Hasmah) to study medicine.'

Siti Saleha's own academic achievements are by no means small. She was the first Malay girl to study at the prestigious London School of Economics, graduating with a diploma in Social Science and Economics. Later, at age 50 - very much undaunted by her much younger course mates - she went on to read law at Universiti Malaya.

She did not stop at that. 'A few years later, I joined my son Zahari in England to acquire a diploma in building and construction.' Why? 'Learning is my hobby - my father had always instilled in us the idea that learning is a life-long process.'

Her career is also colourful - typical of the Mohamed Ali clan. It included working as secretary to her father during World War II, as secretary to a Japanese judge, as a teacher at the Pasar Road English School in Pudu, Kuala Lumpur from 1940 to 1942, and later becoming a welfare officer.

Another person who has known her since the early 70s is K Haridas, 52, managing director of the Association for the Promotion of Higher Education in Malaysia. 'I was part of an international group called Moral Re-Armament which believes in cultivating good moral and spiritual values. Siti Saleha was involved in it when she was in the UK and I while in India.'

Remarks Siti Saleha, 'To have attained honour and prestige in my own right, on my own merit and effort, I attribute it to four guiding principles in morality. These are absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love.'

Haridas commends Siti Saleha as a person who transcends all religions, and who believes that change must come from within. 'She is one person who believes in respect for others and their religious faith and who cherishes the diversity in religion.' Fittingly, she has met the Dalai Lama and Cardinal Sin of the Philippines, and is a regular patron of the Temple Of Fine Arts' activities. (The organisation, located in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur is involved in promoting classical Indian arts.)

On her role in charity, Siti Saleha says, 'It all started with my job as a welfare officer with the Malacca Government. That was when I had the notion that the underprivileged, the young, the aged and the physically handicapped needed some form of guidance and protection.'

But where did she pick up that trait? 'From my mother,' she declares. She recalls how when she was young, her mother checked her pencil box and asked her why all the shorter pencils were missing. 'I gave them to my friends,' Siti Saleha replied. Her mother responded, 'Give them the long ones, next time.'

While Siti Saleha believes in lending a hand to the needy, when it comes to her own self, she advocates 'economic independence'. 'I remember my father drumming that in quite well - "You must be independent of your brothers, sisters, your husband and even your children." And to train us in those days, he gave us not more than three cents as pocket money - although he could afford more than that.'

That's probably what encouraged her to work while studying. 'I used to write for a magazine called The Student and was paid five Malayan dollars for each story.' That experience turned her into an avid writer. She even wrote a column in the then Straits Times called Letters from England while studying in the 40s.

Siti Saleha believes in a close-knit family. 'We try to go on holiday together every year, nowadays with my children and grandchildren. This practice started with my father, who took us all to Port Dickson along with the servants and cats!'

She lost her husband, former Auditor-General Mohd Zain Ahmad, in 1980. Taking over the role of both mother and father, she saw to it that her three children became successful in their own right. Today, they all have their own careers - Zahedi is a businessman, Zabidi a stockbroker and Zahari an interior designer.

Siti Saleha has fond memories of her brother the late Tun Ismail Ali, who was the former governor of Bank Negara, and high regard for Dr Mahathir whom she refers to as a brother. She is also fond of the earlier Prime Ministers especially Tunku Abdul Rahman, whom she loved as her own father.

These days 'when duty does not call', the time is spent on hobbies like writing, reading, music and chatting with grandchildren. 'And I like to watch the F1, especially Michael Schumacher,' she smiles.

Despite her age, she still finds time for these various pursuits. The phrase 'taking it easy' does not exist in Siti Saleha's dictionary. 'It is my nature to be on the go.'

She ponders after saying that and continues, 'Perhaps there will be a day when I must (take it easy), whether I like it or not, but that notion has not crossed my mind. But I hope it will not happen as I don't like to be seen as doing nothing.'

That's Siti Saleha for you, who despite her age and workload, still has the zest and energy that will put much younger women to shame.

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