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Thoroughly modest Millie

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FROM covering court cases to conducting exclusive interviews with political and other celebrities, being a columnist and editing a business magazine, Millicent Danker has gone through the rigours of journalism. Yet it is surprising to learn that she is publicity shy.

"I've been so used to being on the other side, so to speak, that I don't see myself as being newsworthy - and this is not false modesty," she insists. "I cannot remember ever giving an interview of this sort before."

Some might remember her byline especially her landmark interview with the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad after his first year in office.

"Of all the articles I've written, I am proud of this interview with the PM which was done after his one year in office. At that time he disclosed his vision for the country and much of it is what we are seeing now. I admire him for believing that we can do anything if we set our hearts to it," says Danker.

Today, the former journalist with the New Straits Times group is involved in another aspect of the communications business - public relations, a job she says she stumbled upon after a famous PR manager spotted her article and invited her to join the corporate communications department of the national oil company.

"I found my niche," says Danker who today is managing director and principal consultant of Perception Management Sdn Bhd, a public relations and communications consultancy she founded five years ago. The company, which is wholly Malaysian-owned, has just incorporated a branch office in the UK serving Malaysian companies with business interests there.

Asked if journalism helped in carving out her career in PR, she says: "I treasure my experience in journalism and my 10-year stint has helped me immensely in what I'm doing today. As a journalist, one develops key communication skills such as being aware and observing people and situations, talking, listening and writing. These are all the skills required in public relations. The discipline of writing under pressure is also critical, as is the sensitivity to deadlines."

Though journalism and PR belong in the same category of communications science, they are different. "With journalism, you are responsible only to your editor. Your work is much more focused on your story, how newsworthy it is, how creative. In a sense, this is a linear job as compared to PR where you have to multi-task.

"In PR, you are expected to cater to different needs and you have to have a larger variety of skills. This is not to say that the practice of public relations is superior to that of journalism but only that the demands are different. Also, journalism allows you to let your creative juices flow without restraint, whereas with PR you have to write according to a brief from a client. You have to be strategic and this can be confining," says this 51-year-old who also has a master's degree in communications obtained under a post-graduate award from the East-West Centre/University of Hawaii.

Given her years of experience, Danker is one of Malaysia's leading home-grown PR practitioners. From a start in mainstream journalism and publishing after graduating from University Malaya in 1972, she later concentrated on public relations in both in-house and consulting environments. She spent some years as senior counsellor in Burson-

Marsteller's Kuala Lumpur office before taking an appointment as public affairs advisor with a plc.

Her company, established five years ago with just her and her personal assistant, has now grown to a staff of 14 with a small but respectable clientele. She appears modest about her achievements, crediting the growth to "the support of family, friends, colleagues from the media, staff and clients". Everyone, she says, has played a role.

Asked about the factors for entrepreneurial success, Danker says there is no substitute for sheer hard work. "I've always been motivated by the fact that you have to do the best you can for yourself. You have to have a passion for your work. There is no greater satisfaction than doing the best you can and seeing the results."

Though she would not describe herself as having reached the peak of her career just yet, Danker says success is a combination of hard work, support from people around, God's grace and luck. "I am very fortunate to have had extremely supportive people around me all my life. They believe in me. Even in the last eight years when my two daughters have been away studying, I never fail to call them on Sundays to talk to them and tell them my difficulties. And they always give me good advice."

She agrees that running her own company and being in the service industry can be a real challenge. She tries to start the day by telling herself that "whatever I can do today to be of service to someone, I'd like to be able to it."

"If you can tell yourself this, somehow the agony slips away. But of course, I'm only human and there are days when I want to jump out the window and run away!"

Has she made many sacrifices to get to where she is? Danker thinks hard and ventures to say that she believes she has done her best to divide her time between her career and her family. Her daughters Joy and Pia did not see enough of her in the early years, she concedes, but she did try to make sure she did not allow herself to be distracted by hobbies or personal pursuits in their growing years.

"It was literally work and home for me - no golf, no horse-riding or travelling, nothing". But she thinks they have done well for themselves: Joy is 26 and in the final stages of doing her professional exams in chartered accountancy in London while Pia, 21, has only just graduated with a degree in political science.

How does she deal with stress? "I've been blessed with the ability to sleep well, no matter how tired I am. Our type of job calls for long hours but even if I did get home after 10pm, I can sleep soundly for a full seven or eight hours. I think this is important because it restores me," she says. Danker has also been a student of meditation or yoga for over two years and she credits this with helping her remain centred and calm, even in the most stressful of circumstances.

"The spiritual side of life is very crucial to me too. I am a church-going Christian and I truly believe that God has a role to play in modern society."

Although her work has been challenging and demanding in many ways, it has also been very rewarding. "I have grown immensely as a person. Running a business is all about being creative. You have to continually look for opportunities and maximise each one of them. You have to work with people of different backgrounds and skills and you have to continually keep them motivated to do their best."

"But I want to continue working and contributing. I think work keeps you young. My mother is 72 and works full-time as an executive secretary - she is the fastest keyboardist in the world and runs two e-mail accounts! The worse thing that could happen is to be sluggish mentally and emotionally."

If you look at life, it is about work and play. If you didn't work hard, you would not enjoy playing as hard. You enjoy play because you have worked hard. This balance is essential.

"Some people look at work as a difficulty or a chore. I look at it as a joy. I consider myself blessed to have found a talent within me that I can use in my work. I love what I'm doing. There are some people who go through their entire lives never finding that latent talent that is within them and never being able to make the most of it for their families, or society, or whatever. I think parents and educators have a huge responsibility to help their children identify and nurture these talents."

Does she have a dream? "If I have one dream to indulge, it would be to write creatively. Having been a student of English Literature, perhaps I have a notion that I could be a writer - you know, a novelist or a biographer. Writing remains a first love but I have been so busy earning a living I have not yet found the time to pursue creative writing in a serious way. It would be great to take a year off, rent a cottage in Suffolk or Wales, and write. I wonder what our clients would say to that!

"More immediately, I'd love to do some serious research and develop a book as a contribution to the industry. Something relevant to what I know - based on communication policies and styles of Malaysian CEOs, for example. We do a lot of work with CEOs and it would be interesting to analyse how open and transparent they are about their businesses, how well they communicate their messages, how strategic they are in shaping such messages. CEOs shape their companies' image and reputation and there is a price to pay for such reputation. Communication ought to be taken very seriously indeed," she enthuses.

Her other idea is to help raise standards of PR practice in the country. "Public relations is a sophisticated discipline and we are competing with savvy communicators from other societies. If Malaysia does not have a strong, professional team of spin doctors to help the country present itself globally, we will lose out in the international marketplace. I think there ought to be an investment in a very good PR school or an institution that can help upgrade professional standards in this field."

Good public relations is premised on the ability to communicate well and with English being the international language, she feels strongly about its deterioration.

"It is unfortunate that we are starting to lose our competitive edge in terms of our facility with English as the global language of business and industry. Without cutting-edge English we cannot be precise in our debate nor powerful enough in our defence.

"Language is of the essence in international communication and PR is all about using words, the right words, to cut a deal, to swing a vote, to educate, to inform, to convince and even to confuse. We have begun to realise the extent of our handicap and I hope we begin seriously the task of making amends," she adds.

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