

02/05/2004

Artful family

By Zakri Baharudin

THE Malaysian family with the most artists, according to the Malaysian Book of Records, is headed by a former police chief, ZAKRI BAHARUDIN discovers. Pictures by FARISA ISMAIL and CHOO CHOY MAY.

ONE would expect former Sarawak Commissioner of Police Datuk Mohd Yusoff Jaafar to have some not-so-pretty tales to tell, after having spent most of his 35-year career in the Special Branch.

Presumably, many would be cloak-and-dagger stuff, trained as he was at Malaysia's equivalent of America's FBI or the CIA. Some might even be X-File-ish.

Yet this interview has nothing to do with all those adventures, for it concerns the man's commitment to - would you believe it - art!

In the office, he helped maintain law and order. At home, wherever that might be, Yusoff, 57, ensured that there was always space for his children to put paint on canvas.

In the Malaysian Book of Records, Yusoff holds the distinction of being the head of the family with the most number of artists.

From his eldest daughter Nurhayati, 29, to four-year-old Nursuraya, each and every one of his seven children boasts some form of artistic mastery, whether watercolour, oil, pencil or crayon.

In fact, there are nine artists in the family - and one resident critic, mother Datin Hazimah Hamid, 49. Son-in-law Nik Rafin Nik Mustapha, 30, is a painter-architect.

With the addition of daughter-in-law, Wan Fareza Wan Mohd Azmi, the record could well be rewritten this year. Fareza is an accountant but is fast picking up a thing or two in art.

It obviously takes hard work and discipline to nurture in children a passion for art. However, Yusoff seems to know how to go about it.

First, he created an area conducive for such creative pursuits. A corner of the house is always allocated for them to draw and paint. And taking part in art competitions helped maintain their motivation.

"I strongly believe that commitment and togetherness will lead to higher levels of success and I decided to bring my family closer through art," says Yusoff.

"Human relationships are the source of most of both life's happiness and pain. Finding a common platform to serve as a sacred bond is vital in maintaining the family's rhythm of happiness.

"Art has provided me that platform. It has given me the strength and stamina to raise my children's consciousness of the wonderful colours of the Creator and his creations.

"As with many other popular pastimes, art can be enjoyed by the whole family. From my experience as a policeman, I believe strengthening the institution of the family is one way to ameliorate the problems of society."

Actually, Yusoff had been sketching long before he took up law enforcement. He remembers well the day his obsession with art kicked in.

It was during art class in Form One at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Setar, Kedah.

"That day, the teacher had brought a pineapple for us to sketch," recalls Yusoff. "At the end of the class, the teacher picked out two examples.

"The first, which belonged to Saifuddin Hashim, won the teacher's

approval. The other piece, which the teacher said looked like a squatting 'Chief Sitting Bull', was mine.

"The whole class laughed at my 'pineapple', and from that day on, I was determined to somehow beat Saifuddin."

But Saifuddin went on to win the school's Best Art Prize for the next three years. It wasn't until in Form Five that Yusoff finally managed to outclass his good friend and antagonist.

"Later I realised that I could also make a living from art; which is why I always tell my children they don't have to get rich posthumously," he grins.

Among those who sought out Yusoff's services then was his headmaster, Joginder Singh Jessey. He did the cover and illustrations in the latter's book Malaysia in World History. He also landed jobs from various government departments.

"I was 'loaded' at that time because I used to get an art assignment almost every week," admits Yusoff, whose first job was with the Religious Department in Kedah.

But after two years, Yusoff (who was an active boy scout and had always been keen on a career in uniform) signed up to join the police force in November, 1969.

His first posting was as a Special Branch officer in the Besut district in May 1970. But in 1975, after passing his HSC examinations the year before, Yusoff decided to pursue a degree in Social Science at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Upon graduation, Yusoff spent nine months in Penang's Special Branch Department before he became a senior lecturer at the Special Branch Training Institution in Jalan Gurney, Kuala Lumpur (1979-1983).

His longest stint was for seven years as Head of Special Branch in Terengganu (1983-1990), after which he went back to the Special Branch Training Institution, this time as commandant (1990-1994).

He returned to Penang as Deputy Chief Police Officer (1994-1997), held the same post in Pahang (1997-1999) and became CPO of Terengganu in 1999-2001.

He was the Commissioner of Police in Sarawak for two years before retiring last year. The Sarawak Government then got him to serve as advisor to the Ministry of Social Development and Urbanisation, and he held the post for seven months until January.

"The contract was for two years, but I decided to shorten it for the sake of the family who were all in Kuala Lumpur," he confesses.

It was in 1993 when the Yusoffs - who presently run their own art studio called the Golden Palette in Subang Jaya - first gained international recognition.

In a children's art competition hosted by the Olympic Council of Malaysia, 10 drawings were selected for the launch of the International Olympic Committee's Art Museum in Switzerland. Of the 10 drawings, three were created by Yusoff's children - Nurazmal, Nursyuhadah and Nurhidayah.

To the delight of the nation, out of the 6,999 paintings entered for the World Children's Art Competition in Lausanne, Nurazmal's piece, Rhythm of the Olympics, won the top prize.

Today, Nurazmal, 26, is married to Fareza and runs his own studio in Shah Alam. Nurhidayah, 24, is pursuing a degree in design and advertising at the Mara University of Technology (UiTM) in Shah Alam, while Nursyuhadah, 19, is doing her first year in architecture at the International Islamic University.

In addition to art, 14-year-old Nurfarhana has also taken up acting and debuted in a TV3 Malay drama in March. Her brother, Nursalihin, 11, often picks cats as his subject while four-year-old Nursuraya uses mainly

crayons.

Two years ago in Kuching, the Yusoffs held their first ever joint exhibition. Themed All in the Family, the event showcased 110 artworks, of which 98 pieces were sold.

"It was a success and there were many positive reviews. In total, we collected RM115,000 from the sales and 15 per cent of it was donated to the Sarawak Autistic Association," says Yusoff, whose own watercolour, Keletihan, fetched RM6,000.

"We plan to host another exhibition called All in the Family 2 in Kuala Lumpur sometime in May, and hopefully Tun Mahathir Mohamad will be available to launch the event."

But the family's artistic talents are not limited to capturing images on canvas. As a tribute to his fellow officers on his last day as Police Commissioner on January 31, 2003, Yusoff made a compilation of songs on the karaoke machine.

"I recorded a few of my favourite songs which would be appropriate for my last day in the force. I decided to name the compilation Last Journey in Sarawak, but I have yet to make copies of it on CD," he says.

"The family is also toying with the idea of staging a musical performance for our coming exhibition. It's possible as we have a couple of keyboard players, two guitarists and a handful of singers. But nothing is confirmed, as we are still at the planning stage."

With so many artists under one roof, there must be differences in opinion from time to time? "Frequently", according to Yusoff, but he encourages it, so long as they are positive criticisms. "Still, there are times I have to bring in the FRU," he laughs.

Yusoff's favourite subject is nature, and that, he believes, has also helped him in his career as a police officer. "I never once lost my temper in all my years in the service. The canvas has always provided me with an outlet."

So who says artists must always be lonely, tortured souls?

(END)