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Magic of life

By Nuraina Samad

DATUK EFFENDI NORWAWI remembers that day in November well.

He walked into the National Heart Institute, went for a medical test and was told that several blockages had been discovered in his arteries.

"The cardiologist said it was not serious and nothing to be alarmed about. But I was absolutely alarmed. I asked to be relieved of my Cabinet post. I didn't want to work every day and get stressed.

"I knew that if I went to work every day, it would aggravate my condition. That was a real reawakening for me," said Effendi, speaking publicly about the reasons for his sudden retirement from active politics. He did not contest in the March general election.

He became more careful about what food he ate, cutting down on his favourite pisang goreng and fried fish. Sometimes he goes vegetarian for a fortnight. All part of the regime to stay healthy.

Since leaving the Cabinet, he has been a man of leisure, doing the things he loves - taking guitar lessons and doing aikido.

"I have time for myself and my family, especially for my youngest, my five-year-old son, Eridani. You know, I have found what's meaningful to me.

"It is magic, spending time with my son, seeing him horse-riding, swim. So beautiful."

Effendi, 56, missed out doing the same with his three children from his marriage to Datin Seri Faridah Hashim. He has two children from his second marriage to actress Tiara Jacquelina.

"We were so busy building our careers, trying to be high performers. Now, spending time with our families is what gives us pleasure.

"I am telling everybody we have to have time for ourselves. Three things that are important - spend time on yourself, your family and do things for the community."

His retirement plans were interrupted last week when it was announced that the Government had appointed him as the Special Envoy for Higher Education. His task: To persuade top-class universities to set up branch campuses here or collaborate with local universities. He pointed the way forward in an interview with NURAINA SAMAD.

Q: Why do you think you were given the Special Envoy's job?

A: I think it is because I was involved in bringing the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) here. At that time (Tun) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) and (then Education Minister) Datuk Seri Najib (Razak) saw the advantage of bringing them here to help Malaysia in terms of enhancing our research capabilities because MIT is a world-class institution that will help produce the top scientists in the country.

Q: Did the appointment surprise you?

A: I knew about it from the DPM. I must say it was a total surprise for me.

I was happy to accept the job. I have already called my friends, and they said they are so happy to come around to help me. My friends are from the private sector, entrepreneurs and academicians. One of them is Tan Sri Dr Lin See Yan (Harvard Club of Malaysia Foundation chairman and former Bank Negara deputy governor). He sits on three councils of Harvard University.

Q: Have you started your assignment?

A: Yes. But before I go into that. Let me say that as special envoy for

higher education, I represent the Government. As special envoy, I have that stature that allows me, or rather, facilitates me to meet with top decision-makers of universities or ministers of education of any particular country. All this is under the guidance of Higher Education Minister Datuk Shafie Salleh.

Q: What is your plan?

A: The Government is hoping to do two things - go out and step up our collaboration with foreign universities by enticing them to come here to set up campuses.

Either they set up campus, have special short programmes, or exchange programmes between professors, students or exchange learning and research programmes.

Q: By having exchange programmes, it seems like it is a back to basics plan?

A: The thing is, we have always said that we want to make Malaysia a centre of excellence. Now we have to come out with specific plans that can realise this.

So plan number one, we have to identify the leading universities in the world, say in economics - London School of Economics. The best agriculture school in Holland?

Secondly, we have to make it so attractive for the best foreign colleges to have collaboration with us. Every country wants this - Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia. We are not the only one.

The challenge for us is how to make us the most attractive. We have to walk the extra mile. That means not just me, or Datuk Shafie or the PM. It is about the whole system. We must all walk the extra mile. Our civil servants, everybody, if we want to make this work.

Q: What would be the main benefit of such an approach?

A: The dividend is this. We would be recognised as the centre of excellence for education in this region after being able to bring in the best - MIT, Stanford, Cambridge.

Today, we have 35,000 foreign students. Datuk Shafie is thinking, why can't we increase this number to 100,000. This is very possible.

But the nicer dividend for me is that with foreign universities allowed here, just the interaction with our community, our academia, our Government will have an impact on improving the quality of education in the country, I guarantee you.

Q: Any other dividend?

A: If we are successful in this, Malaysians will have more options to send their children for university education.

Q: Is there a time-frame for a plan of action?

A: I would say within two months I can come out with a very good plan. And if this plan is adopted, then we will see. We will give ourselves a realistic schedule. We must have a schedule. In the next three months, we will have serious contacts with some of these leading institutions.

But it will take a long time to get them here, convince them. That's where we have to work the hardest. To make it as convenient and as attractive as possible so that these people will make up their minds very quickly.

Q: How do you see your role as the special envoy?

A: I see it as part of the innovation under our PM's administration. We have lower education under Datuk Hishammuddin (Husseini) and higher education under Datuk Shafie. Hisham can really concentrate on primary and secondary schools.

My appointment is just an extension of that innovation. With the Minister of Higher Education having to do so many things, we need someone to assist him, to go all over the world. What I will be doing is

complementing Datuk Shafie.

Q: Your new job will eat into your new found independence.

A: I am honoured by this appointment but I still want to maintain my independence. I want to go back to my golf. When I was in Government, I did not play golf. My last handicap was 14. Now, I am so embarrassed to even put my score on the board.

My job now allows for that independence. I don't have to clock in.

Q: What about your health?

A: I am better now. I sleep better now.

Q: Was it really that bad as a Cabinet Minister?

A: Ooh. It is really stressful when you are given the heavy responsibility of being a minister.

Q: There is speculation that you are going back to Sarawak for bigger things?

A: (Tan Sri) Taib is an astute leader, always far-sighted. For 10 years, he has been grooming some people to take over as Chief Minister. It is public knowledge that the three of us were being groomed for the job - Datuk Adenan Satem, Abang Johari and me. We were all given various responsibilities to develop.

I am not the only one. There are others. Taib is a very clever man, and I don't think he is limited for choices of people to succeed him.

Q: How does your family feel about the new position?

A: Tiara is very worried. Suddenly, I am so busy again. She hasn't seen me in two days, I have been so busy. Going around everywhere. She is a bit concerned now.

(END)