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Lucrative venture in restoring old motorbikes

ALOR STAR, Tues. - Abandoned 1950s vintage motorcycles rusting in the compounds of their owners' houses are common eyesores in many villages, but an enterprising couple here has managed to turn the "worthless junk" into a lucrative venture.

The couple, Abdul Rahman Mansure, 44, and Sharifah Othman, 39, make hefty profits restoring vintage bikes for sale to collectors and nostalgia buffs.

The couple, who have three children, buy abandoned Honda Cubs from villagers for between RM100 and RM300, restore them, and then sell them for up to RM15,000 each. Their business has been so good that they cannot keep up with demand.

They have been operating a workshop for the past 17 years, but for the past seven years, they have specialised in Honda 50 and Honda C70 motorcycles (popularly called kapcais), as well as Honda 90 Standard and Sport models. The bikes were manufactured from 1957 to the mid-1960s.

They operate from their home, a stone's throw away from the personal residence of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Titi Gajah, here.

Apart from their famous neighbour, the husband-and-wife team's effort is also special because it is the wife who is the skilled mechanic. Sharifah acts as the chief foreman and is assisted by a worker, while Abdul Rahman is in charge of spraying the bikes in a range of attractive colours.

Sharifah is not a qualified mechanic, but learnt her trade from a vintage bike specialist who now works for her. She became so adept that she can now fully restore rusted and broken-down four-stroke engines and gearboxes to perfect working order without any help.

"I tried to learn the craft from her, but I gave up after a while because she was far too skilful compared to me," said Abdul Rahman when met at their workshop, which has about 20 motorcycles in various stages of restoration.

Abdul Rahman said he would purchase abandoned bikes from residents in villages throughout Kedah. Bikes with their registration cards still in order would be restored and sold, while those without are stripped for parts.

"Most of these bikes are in a sorry state when we spot them.

"Some are left abandoned in chicken coops, while others are used as makeshift barriers to keep goats out of the house compound," said Sharifah.

Abdul Rahman used to buy the bikes direct from their owners, but now employs agents instead.

"Most villagers refuse to sell me their old bikes because they consider it an affront that I would want to buy their `junk', and they would chase me away and tell me they were not so desperate for money that they would sell their trash.

"I think it is just a strange mindset that some people have, or maybe their reluctance is because they don't trust outsiders like me poking about in their compounds."

Abdul Rahman said his agents, mostly well-connected villagers spread out in several districts, would alert him when they discovered such bikes.

After the bike has been bought, about RM500 would be spent to restore them before they are sold for between RM3,000 and RM15,000 each, mainly to

businessmen from Kuala Lumpur.

The price varies according to the year of manufacture and the registration number of the bike. Abdul Rahman pointed to a beautifully restored 1957 Honda 50 bearing the registration number "K57", which he said would easily sell for over RM10,000.

"Most of my customers used to ride these bikes in their youth, so they have much nostalgic value, but these are also very practical to own and run, being very sturdy and requiring minimal maintenance."

On their famous neighbour, Abdul Rahman remembers how he used to go to Dr Mahathir's house without fail when he was a boy in the 1960s.

"He is a kind and caring man who would give me RM2 during Hari Raya, which was a big amount back then," he said.

Abdul Rahman said he was not sure if Dr Mahathir knew about his business, but added that the former Prime Minister had been a big influence on him and the villagers in Titi Gajah.

"Everyone here regards him as a role model," he said.

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