

30/01/2004

Charming and modest champion speaker

Debra Chong

PUBLIC speaking? Big deal, a few might say. What's so great about some Malaysian gal winning the 2004 world championship at yakking anyway? The lot of them are just a bunch of snotty brats who love to sound clever, as if they have the answers to all the world's problems.

These are some of the misconceptions youngsters have about the "elite" art of public speaking.

But meeting Irma Nurzahrah Junain, the 24th World Champion in Public Speaking at the recently concluded World Universities Debating Championship in Singapore, will clear away such close-minded views about the subject.

This 21-year-old from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, is poised, articulate and warm, and can charm the socks off you.

"Public speaking is not just for those who have political or diplomatic aspirations," stated Irma vehemently.

"It is about the way it makes one think. I think that the world would be a better place if everyone would stop basing their opinions on stereotyped ideas. I like the fact that I can take time to think about the issues, asking questions and gathering information before I form an opinion on them.

"I have found that debating and public speaking builds your confidence. Just last night I had the privilege of speaking in front of the ex-Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and it took all the courage I had not to just faint because of the sheer pressure I was under!"

A law student at the International Islamic University of Malaysia in Gombak, Selangor, Irma has garnered several trophies: Best Speaker in the 2003 Royal Malaysian Inter-Varsity Debating Championship (her team won in the Junior category); a finalist in the 2002 and 2003 Woman IV (a women-only debating competition involving Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore); and the debating runner-up title in the 2004 WUDC English as a Second Language category together with teammate, Raihan Ismail.

Her name is also in the Malaysia Book of Records as the first Malay to ever win a public speaking championship in English. And she's only 21.

It takes hard work - a great deal of reading on diverse issues such as current affairs, history, literature, and many more topics - and also guts and sheer determination to get to where Irma is.

"What I admire most about her is her persistence," confided Dr Muhammad Arif Zakauallah, Irma's trainer and head of IIUM's Speech and Interpersonal Communications Enhancement Department (SPICE).

It sounds intimidating but public speaking and debating are talents that can be acquired, not ones you have to be born with. That has been IIUM's approach since 1991. The key ingredient is attitude.

But as Irma herself modestly admits, her accomplishments were due to the constant support and understanding she received from her parents, trainers, teammates and university rector Dr Mohd Kamal Hassan, whose concern for the welfare of his students is exemplary.

"Abang Abdul Latif (assistant head of SPICE) breaks his back for our debating society. He not only spends most of his free time training us or planning our training, he also affects us in a positive way. He is such an honest and pious individual, he makes me want to be a better person.

"Another individual who deserves mention is Dr Muhammad Arif Zakauallah. He started the club and without him, we would have been denied the best

pastime there is. He is the father figure in the club and he gives us the motivation we need to succeed.

"I am really thankful that I joined IIUM's English Debating Association. The most significant way it changed me as a person is how it made me more aware of the issues around me.

"It's easy to be ignorant. It's easy to not read the papers, to conveniently change from CNN to the cartoon channel and just doze through the 8 o'clock news. But when you're debating, it's not possible to miss out on these when the next debating training session is all about the current news."

You don't have to be a winner to reap the rewards of public speaking. It is in itself its own reward, says Irma.

"To be able to voice your opinions, to exchange thoughts with people from different cultures around the world, to learn to speak your mind and erase stereotyped perceptions is reward enough.

"There is so much conflict in the world right now ...especially over Islam and Muslims. The younger generation want peace, and to be able to resolve these issues in a peaceful way. Participating in championships has allowed us to come together. Like in Singapore where the championship was held, the Israeli teams came to our rounds and cheered for us.

"They really supported us. This clearly disproves the notion that Israelis and Muslims can't get along. There was chemistry there, and we formed great friendships. So you see, the youths succeed where diplomats sometimes fail."

Words from a youthful idealist? Perhaps, but powerful and inspiring nonetheless.