

01/11/2003

A popular and humble student

Aida Ahmad

"WE never know what will transpire further down the road in our lives. Back in the 50s and 60s, life was simple as it always centred on studies and some extra co-curricular activities.

"But I never imagined my good old friend Abdullah would be the next Prime Minister of Malaysia," said lawyer-cum-businessman G. Rethinasamy, who studied at Bukit Mertajam High School with Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from 1953 to 1957.

The two boarded the same bus to school virtually every day, from Form One to Form Five, and it was then that they cemented their friendship.

"I had to travel 24 kilometres every day to school in BM (Bukit Mertajam) because my parents' house then was in Pokok Machang, Tasek Gelugor.

"Abdullah also had to commute on the same bus from Kepala Batas.

"Even after school, we would head home on the same bus," he said when met at his law firm in Jalan Bagan Luar in Butterworth.

Rethinasamy said Abdullah, who was a Boy Scout and the school magazine editor, was a workaholic who was popular with his classmates.

"Abdullah was a patrol leader in Scout camp while I was a cross-country runner.

"I guess that was where he got his leadership skills from," he said.

Rethinasamy, 64, said he never expected Abdullah, who refers to him as Samy, to be where he is now as they never discussed politics during their adolescent years.

He said Abdullah always attended school wearing a songkok and was a stickler for neatness.

"He was very particular about his attire and always conscious of his religious obligations because of his background, but he never imposed his religious principles on others.

"One of my favourite memories was that of weekends, when I would go over to his house and his mother, Datuk Khailan Hassan, would offer me some kopi O and freshly-made pulut udang. Needless to say, she was a good cook, so a visit during Hari Raya became a must for me after that.

"She had a sweet motherly personality, but his father, Datuk Ahmad Badawi Abdullah, the headmaster of a religious school just across the road from their house was somewhat reserved and very strict with his children."

Both Rethinasamy and Abdullah also went to school with Abdullah's cousins, Manap Abdullah and Telekom Malaysia Bhd chairman Tan Sri Md Radzi Mansor.

Rethinasamy said Manap was the prankster among their classmates and always played jokes on Abdullah.

"In school, Abdullah always carried a big canvas bag to lug his heavy load of books.

"One day after school, Abdullah and I were walking towards the bus stop and he noticed that his bag was unusually heavy.

"He opened the bag and subsequently found a big brick inside. He turned to me and said, 'Samy, this is the work of that rascal Manap!'"

After 1958, Rethinasamy lost contact with Abdullah.

"Both of us were offered the choice of continuing Form Six at Methodist Boys School but I chose St Xavier's Institution because it was nearer to the ferry terminal.

"I left for the United Kingdom to read law at Lincoln's Inn in August

1970 while Abdullah left for Kuala Lumpur to obtain his degree in Islamic studies at Universiti Malaya," he said.

Rethinasamy returned four years later, but it was only in 1977 that he again met up with Abdullah, who was by then Kepala Batas MP, during Hari Raya Aidilfitri at his house in Kepala Batas.

"Since then, I have never failed to visit him during Hari Raya.

"He is still the same humble and simple chap I spent recess with at school.

"I always make time to meet up with him at his functions in Penang, and when he sees me, he will put his arm around my shoulder and introduce me as his classmate to friends and dignitaries, including Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon.

"At one of the functions, he said to Koh, 'My friend Samy here is a lawyer and a businessman so you better be careful!'," he said, laughing.

The class of Form Five A from BM High School met at a reunion dinner last month at Petronas Club in KLCC, hosted by Abdullah.

Many of his closest friends, now architects, engineers and teachers, attended the dinner, said Rethinasamy, adding that Abdullah said he wanted to make the reunion an annual event to relive memories with his school buddies.

Rethinasamy was confident that Abdullah would be able to successfully take over Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's responsibilities.

"He will definitely succeed because Dr Mahathir, an accomplished politician, has absolute trust in him to lead the country.