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Self-taught father of three graduates in law

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KAJANG, Fri. - A father of three who never went to secondary school will get his law degree from Universiti Teknologi Mara tomorrow to crown his colourful and challenging life.

Md Shariff Mohamad Yusoff, 57, who self-taught his way through the Lower Certificate of Education, Malaysian Certificate of Education and Higher School Certificate, now wants to be a practising lawyer after a mainly frugal early adulthood when his ambition was to become a comedian.

From ringgit-a-day odd-jobs, Shariff rose to become deputy superintendent at the Prisons Department. And when he gets his scroll tomorrow, it will also be two days after his daughter does so in actuarial science.

The third among 10 siblings, Shariff had to quit school when fees became unaffordable for the family in Alor Star.

Considered a naughty boy by his late father, Shariff was told to work to keep him occupied.

For a time, he ran errands for the Mico Medical Hall in Alor Star. There, he remembers admiring one of the few sleek and shiny American cars in town usually parked nearby.

It was the Pontiac owned by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, then a private medical practitioner in Alor Star and an inspiration to many a young Malay boy, said Shariff.

He also did several odd jobs, including washing dishes and chopping firewood in a coffeeshop.

None of this dampened his ambition to make it big one day - in education or if that did not work out, as a comedian.

With earnings of RM1 a day and no educational qualifications, Shariff talked his way into night school.

He passed his LCE in 1966 and earned a job on a project to develop Sungai Muda.

While here, Shariff studied for his MCE at night after work, with bought and borrowed notes.

A cousin studying for the same exam helped Shariff by relating what had been taught in class.

Later, between periods of joblessness, he pursued his HSC, once again tutoring himself to a pass.

Two years later, Shariff married Siti Fatimah Hussain and began his career with the Prisons Department.

At one point, he even served at the Centre for Protective Custody in Kamunting where detainees included University of Malaya lecturer Dr Syed Hussein Ali and then student-activist Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Despite promotions and a quick rise through the ranks, Shariff was not satisfied.

He went on to get a Diploma in Counselling in 1984, a Diploma in Law in 1994 and a degree in Law this year, surviving a heart attack and a bypass surgery in the midst of it all.

"It was always a struggle, money was always a problem and nothing ever came easy.

"But I had faith in myself and knew my dreams would come true someday," said Shariff, who began chambering at law firm Hakem Arabi and Associates this year.