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One small step for her, one giant leap for Malaysia

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WHAT comes to mind when one talks about Professor Datuk Mazlan Othman? `Only that she is the architect who launched Malaysia's national space programme through her vision,' comments Sangat Singh, technical advisor at Astronautic Technology Sdn Bhd.

Her vision and commitment to all things connected to outer space culminated in the launching of Tiungsat 1 in 2000, the country's first Made-In-Malaysia micro satellite. Still in orbit, the satellite takes pictures of the earth's surface to determine pollution, forestry and agricultural activities and can also be used for meteorological purposes and in monitoring natural disasters.

Currently serving as the director general of the National Space Agency (NSA), her role among other things is to ensure the next Malaysian satellite is launched smoothly and to help academic research. Barring unforeseen circumstances, another micro satellite - Macsat - is set to be launched in 2003.

She also wants to make the space industry a major force in the economy by making Malaysian companies manufacture the materials used in spacecraft like camera transponders or the software to man such vehicles. `If we are committed to it, we will be able to build up our expertise soon,' she says softly but with conviction.

How did it all start for Mazlan? It was way back in 1986 when Halley's Comet last streaked the Earth's skies. Mazlan recalls, `I wanted to change the mindset of Malaysians. I had to break the cycle. In conjunction with this, I organised a public gallery and show at the Islamic Centre in Kuala Lumpur.'

Datuk Dr Yusuf Noor, who was the then Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Islamic affairs, helped Mazlan to organise it. It was at this time that Mazlan's activities caught the eye of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Unknown to Mazlan, this was only just the beginning of a journey into the stars for her. The public show was a great success and in 1987, the idea was mooted for Malaysia to foray into the area of astronomy and astrophysics. At that time, she was an associate professor teaching astronomy and astrophysics at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Mazlan recalls how she was gung-ho in trying to prove her worth upon receiving her fellowship at the University of Tokyo, Japan. `Fresh from university with a PhD in hand, I thought I could change the whole world. I later realised Malaysia was not ready yet for astronomy. Still, I pursued.'

Norhizam Ritchie Souza, who has worked for Mazlan and has known her since 1996, finds Mazlan an inspiring person to work for. She says, `She is always open to new ideas, even to the extent of accommodating ideas that do not work. She has a rare gift for encouraging an idea wherever possible.' Norhizam adds that while Mazlan is trained as a scientist, she is quick to learn new things. `She takes the initiative. As a friend, she is a thoughtful person.'

Charting Malaysia's trek into space was not Mazlan's only achievement for the country. She was also the first Malaysian woman to become the country's representative at the United Nations (UN) Office for Outer Space Affairs in Vienna, Austria. She was appointed as its head and director.

What was her Vienna stint like? As head and director, her role was

multi-skilled. 'At one end, we had the United States, the world's leader in space technology while on the other end, we had Africa which is nowhere on the space chart. I had to play a delicate role in ensuring any policies implemented took heed of each nation.'

She was also responsible for arranging space activities and coordinating and convening interagency meetings for the UN. She also represented the UN secretary-general at world technical conferences and meetings on space, space research and telecommunications.

More importantly, Mazlan, who has been the director general of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment's Space Science Division (Baksa) for seven years, promoted the peaceful use of space and space technology, which has long been the stand of the UN and Malaysia.

Mazlan explains, 'The militarisation of space is a delicate issue. Under the UN, there is a treaty that says space is a heritage of mankind but this (policy) is fast eroding due to increased private sector involvement in space. For instance, 1997 marked the first time when private sector investment in space exceeded that of governments. The increased involvement of the private sector in the field is a dangerous phenomenon. So far, it has been good but steps have to be taken to ensure the people are protected.'

The irony is, for all her passion for the stars, Mazlan was not like that at all in the beginning. 'I was more interested in English Literature and Arts, not the sciences.'

At first, she was interested in the arts but she later changed her mind to become a brain surgeon. When she realised she did not have the stamina for medicine, it led Mazlan to a totally different vocation.

'Instead, I became an astrophysicist simply because I was a dreamer. I like to dream a lot. I was a lazy student and I did not like to memorise a lot of things. It is different with maths and physics. Once you understand the concept behind the formulas, then you are free to daydream as much as you want,' says the first woman astrophysicist in Malaysia.

'When I started on astrophysics, there was no way for anyone to ensure that I would get a job once I returned. But I went ahead anyway,' says Mazlan who graduated in physics and was awarded an honorary doctorate in physics, both from the University of Otago, New Zealand.

As it turned out, Mazlan was way ahead of her time and the country was not ready for someone like her. But then came the setting up of a national planetarium in 1987. In 1989, the project broke ground. So close was Mazlan to the project that by the time the National Planetarium was officially opened in 1994, 'every brick knew who I was'.

Mazlan can be described a simple person at heart with no airs. Her name card does not carry her title of 'Datuk' - in 1997, she was conferred the award of Panglima Jasa Negara which carries the title.

Born in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan on Dec 11, 1951, Mazlan was raised with much love and nurturing. 'Our family was simple. My late father (Othman Mohd Lela) encouraged me a lot. But my mother, being a mother and a housewife, despaired I would not end up with a husband when I decided to take up physics. Generally, we were given the basic necessities in life.'

In her spare time, Mazlan still likes to read Bertrand Russell - as she used to when she was young - or Sidney Sheldon. 'I was not (and still isn't) the kind to read Mills & Boon.'

Still sporting a short hairstyle, Mazlan was known to be a tomboy in her younger days. That explains her liking for outdoor sports. She even she possesses a pilot's licence and when she does not feel like flying among the clouds, she climbs mountains to be among them.

'I find it a great physical challenge that disciplines your mind. But I am too busy at the moment to fly. However, I still like to climb

mountains. I climbed Gunung Kinabalu recently. It is very easy to climb it. You can get there in half a day which is about all the time I can afford nowadays,' she states.

`I much prefer Gunung Tahan. It takes you much longer, about eight days for you to get there and come back, but it is harder, much more challenging and very beautiful,' she says earnestly.

Her outdoor interests date back to her schooldays when she preferred to look out of classroom windows at the sky and daydream. Sometimes, her eye caught the sports field and she became very active in sports.

In her seven years at Kolej Tunku Kursiah in Seremban, Mazlan played everything from hockey to netball to athletics. She was always away on weekends participating in one tournament or another.

`By the time I came back, I was always too tired to study and that's why I preferred maths and physics to other subjects. I told you, I was a lazy student,' she chuckles.

Mazlan shares her outdoor interests with her husband who climbs with her. Professor Ibrahim Komoo, a professor in geology at UKM where they met, is also very supportive of her work.

`A lot of the time, we can work together very well. He does geology which is earth science and I am doing space science. Both overlap in their study of planetary motion and action.'

They have two children, Adi Johan, 22 and Elida Izani, seven. Adi is currently pursuing (what else?) a course in physics and astronomy in the United States.

That essentially is Mazlan, one whose enthusiasm and excitement for outer space is very contagious, as this writer came to find out.