

When Hasmah met Mahathir

By JUNE H.L. WONG

DATIN Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali is no Hillary Clinton and that's a compliment. If anything, the beleaguered American First Lady could perhaps learn a thing or two from the Malaysian First Lady on how to win the love and respect of her countrymen and women.

As wife of the country's longest serving Prime Minister, Dr Siti Hasmah has consistently been warmly gracious, intelligent and elegant - the perfect partner to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It's a role she has worked hard at because, as she puts it, "Behind every successful man is a wife."

She adds: "I always correct people when they say, 'Behind every successful man is a woman.' I say no, not a woman, not any woman, it's the wife."

Her own remarkable marriage is testimony to this fact. Fresh from medical school, she married Dr Mahathir on Aug 5, 1956. In their 40 years together so far, she has helped and supported his career, first as a doctor, and then, as a politician.

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And for 23 years, she carved out an impressive career for herself. Her list of achievements include: one of the first Malay women doctors; first woman to be appointed State Maternal and Child Health Officer in Kedah; author of several articles on family medicine and the socioeconomic factors associated with pregnancy and childbearing in Malaysia.

She has also held or is holding numerous posts in various organisations and is the recipient of awards from around the world, the most recent being the United Nations Fund for Women (Unifem) Award in Beijing last September.

But ask her what she would like to be remembered as and her unassuming reply is: "A grandmother of seven."

Pressed further, she thoughtfully adds: "As one who tried to help the women in our country, regardless of race, one who tried to help mothers look after their children and avoid unhealthy practices."

She had ample opportunity to do just that when she served with the Maternal and Child Health Department in Kedah. Mothering and caring for others was something that came very early to Dr Siti Hasmah.

"My mother said I was always inclined to help people. Whenever there were any cuts or wounds in the family, I would be the one bandaging them up.

"And I was always the brave one at home where looking at blood and stuff like that were concerned. I was quick at reacting too and that's what put me in the medical line."

Taking up medicine, however, was a tough, uphill struggle.

"It was very hard for me because I got in with only one science subject - biology. It was just after the war and I didn't have the opportunity to do chemistry and

had to repeat my first year.

"That was a great disappointment. But I was very determined and the college (King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore) authorities gave me the chance to repeat."

Having supportive parents (not to mention a very progressive grandmother) helped.

"My parents were very conservative but very determined people, especially my dad. He was very determined that his 10 children - seven sons and three daughters - would have a full education.

"He used to send us to school himself until the boys were old enough to cycle. We girls

boys, to Batu Road School. All of the boys went to Victoria Institution, it was the best school.

"My parents had no favourites, although I think my dad had a soft spot for me - I was the youngest girl. He used to cane my brothers if they didn't go to school, there was no excuse for not going. We also received a lot of encouragement from my (paternal) grandmother who believed that girls should be educated - very unusual in those days."

The net result was accomplished children who went on to become very accomplished adults. Dr Siti Hasmah's outstanding siblings include former Bank Negara governor and current Permodalan Nasional Bhd

Mentri Besar Datuk Ahmad Razali, Sukon '98 Bhd executive chairman and former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Tan Sr. Hashim, Datin Paduka Saleha who is well-known for her social and welfare work, Datuk Jaffar who was recently voted top advertising man in Asia and the youngest brother, Zainal Abidin, an architect with his own established firm.

If there was any lesson in life the young Siti Hasmah learned from her dad, it was "honesty and the willingness to work hard."

Life was comfortable for the family; Dr Siti Hasmah remembers how the family had cooks from India and amahs from China working for them.

"We had an amah, sometimes two, who came straight from China. At that time, it was quite a common practice. They stayed one or two years.

"I used to be fascinated by their long hair and would watch them comb and plait their hair into buns. I used to sleep with them. We were very close, they ate what we ate; at first they cried because everything was pedas (spicy)."

Her father started as a clerk in the Health Department in Klang where she was born ("That was the closest we got to anything medical!"). He took up a law correspondence course and eventually became a public trustee and official assignee. He retired in 1949. Her father passed away in 1967 when he was 71. Her mother died in 1976 at the age of 76.

Life as a medical student proved to be exciting and eventful. In the 1947 class of 65 students, she was the only Malay girl. There were seven Malay boys. It wasn't surprising that she received a lot of attention.

She was friendly to everyone but as fate would have it, it was Mahathir, just a year older, whom she fell in love with.

"I liked his personality and we were together most of the time."