

DATUK Ghazi Sheikh Ramli can't control the tears that well up in his eyes. The few seconds of silence that pass seem like forever as he composes himself.

"I get very emotional when I talk about things close to my heart," apologises the former Senator who now heads the think-tank Iqra.

I had just touched on his favourite topic — creativity, innovation and how Malaysians can truly contribute to nation building.

The 65-year-old Kedahan, fondly known as "the ICT man" during his Senate years, says: "Between 1997 and 2003, Information and Communication Technology excited me. I talked about nothing but ICT, not only in Malaysia but in all other countries I visited."

But a trip to the Frankfurt Book Festival in 1999 changed all that.

"I bumped into a huge sign that read 'Inventive Thinking'. My curiosity was piqued," he said.

Soon the subject of creativity and innovation intrigued him too. Recalls the father of five, who had aspired to be a doctor as a child: "I made friends with the head guy there and found out more. Back home, everyone was talking about ICT but my interests had moved on."

He travelled around the world, meeting people in the field. "It's inspiring!" he exclaims. "It makes me realise that the country needs something. The leaders have expressed the vision and what you need to do, but what's missing is how does one go about preparing the younger generation so that the final output can be achieved?"

Vision 2020, which calls for a bigger quota of intellectuals in the country, excites Ghazi. "Knowledge economy is all about mind power. How do you use your brain? It's the greatest power given by God. We're all born the same, given the hardware. It's the software that one needs to develop."

Ghazi started in the leather industry. He still thinks like a manufacturer. "If I wanted to produce a pair of shoes, I had to start with the raw materials, the hides. The process is applicable here too."

Building a nation of thinkers is not easy, he admits, sighing. "Sometimes I feel very lonely on this subject. I keep talking to many people about it, intellectuals, but the response has never been up to my expectation."

His faith was buoyed when he met a Chinese inventor six years ago. Stifling another burst of emotions, he says softly: "He made me realise that I was not alone and there are people out there who are on the same plane as me."

This triggered a flurry of visits around Europe. The last

conference he attended was in Poland, organised by the European Association of Creativity and Innovation. "I surfed websites and found that countries like the US, Japan and Korea all had associations on creativity. Why not Malaysia? If they are doing well in the area of creativity and innovation, and in particular, coming out with great intellectual properties all of which are patented, why not us? We must start somewhere and then we can be like them."

That's how the idea for Makri (Malaysian Association of Creativity and Innovation which Ghazi heads) was conceived. Ghazi wanted kampung folk to be included. So he set up a Pusat Ilmu or knowledge centre in his hometown of Jitra, shortly after completing his senatorship.

"I wanted to bring ICT to the villagers," he says. "I had Tun Dr Mahathir, then MP of Kubang Pasu, to launch it. I remember saying to him, '... you launched MSC in KL for Malaysia, so I'd like you to launch a micro MSC in the kampung.'"

He adds: "If my great-great-grandfather built the first pondok and taught the pondok way, cara kitab, I wanted to bring in the new elements of knowledge city."

Ghazi set up computer labs at the centre. In a spare room he kept some of his old consumer electronic things that he had brought from KL.

Extensive travels around the world made him see his "old junk" in a new light. Now these things have educational value to the next generation. "That's how Galleria Cik Lah came about," he says, beaming. "The gallery is also an extension of my interest in creativity and innovation."

The Galleria, spread over three floors, houses a huge collection — 300 in all — of consumer electronic items in there, divided into three sections — audio, video, multimedia and communications. The audio section houses old gramophones to radio, radiogram to modern sets and one of the oldest karaoke sets in the country.

His vinyl collection comprises old recordings of voices right up to today's more modern offerings. One of the earliest film cameras around holds pride of place as do a number of old projectors, something he began collecting in the 70s.

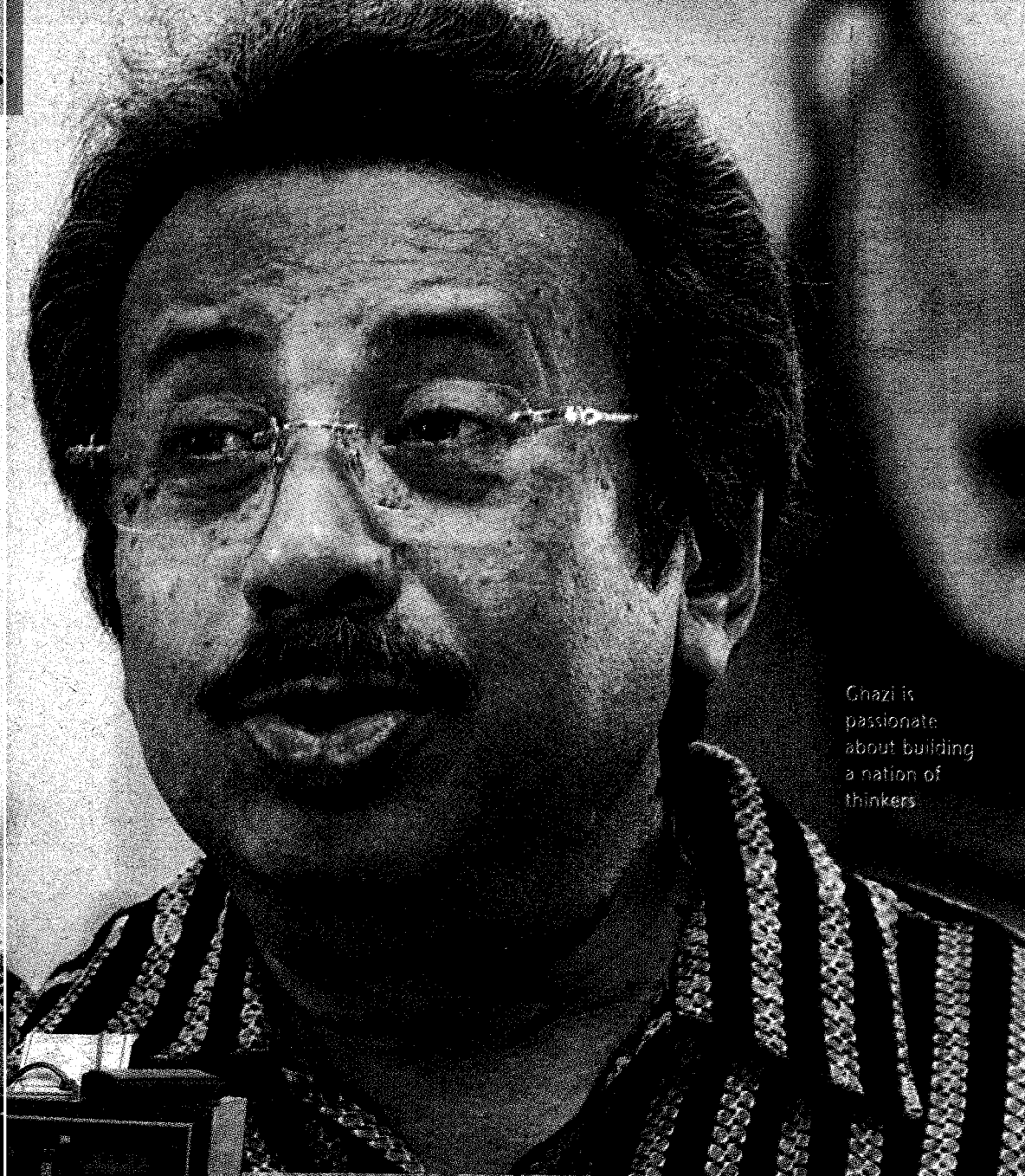
There's an inherent message in here, says Ghazi. "These are all products of the mind. We need to use our God-given brain and come up with something too because all the others are."

Don't worry about perfection. "Look at these innovations. They're

GHAZI USE YOUR BRAINS!

A passionate man, ex-Senator Datuk Ghazi Sheikh Ramli is moved to tears as he talks to INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL about his dreams

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Ghazi is passionate about building a nation of thinkers



Displaying his audio collection

constantly being improved on. That's the message," he adds. "Sometimes when you first do something and it's a failure, but you continue. Sometimes when you do it, it takes others to complete it. That's *nasib*. But it's OK, because if you sell that bit of the idea to others, you also get something. If you don't carry it on to the market, your commercial value is less."

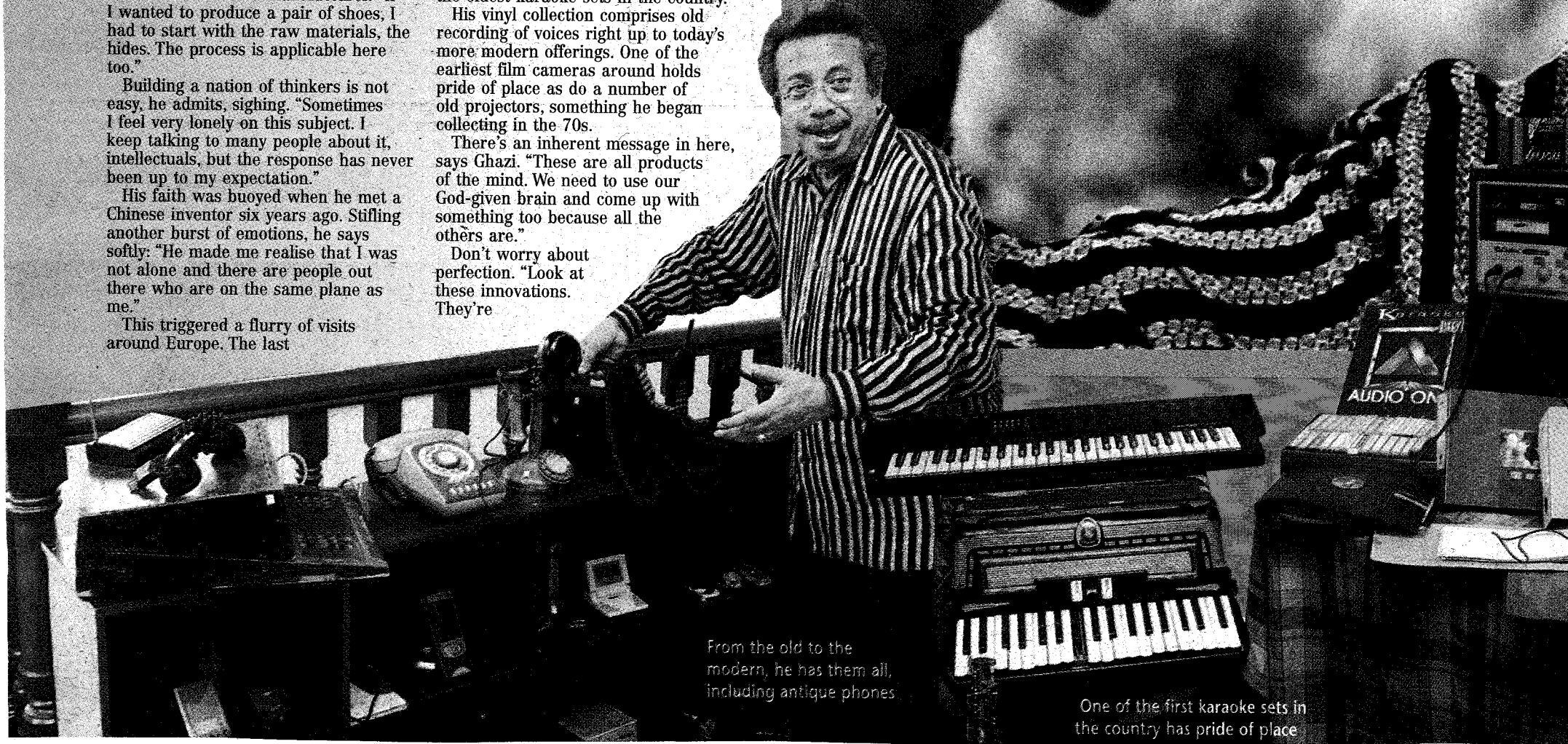
When he's not ardently advocating his passion for creativity and innovation, Ghazi relaxes by playing the oud, a hobby that he shares with his late father who studied in Kaheerah. He also enjoys playing tennis with his kids and grandchildren, and singing along to Arabic songs on his state-of-the-art karaoke machines, of which he has eight, one specifically dedicated to Arabic songs only.

What's his ultimate dream? "To set up a special group for collectors' items. We can go by product groups. I have electric consumer products, someone else might have something else. We can collect and assemble all these things in an exhibition. There's a lot of learning outcome to be derived from this."

Call Datuk Ghazi at 03-6201 2928/6201 9928 to find out more.

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Picture by SYAHARU ABDIN



From the old to the modern, he has them all, including antique phones

One of the first karaoke sets in the country has pride of place



With his collection of oud which he acquired on his many travels

