

Khair wanted us to appreciate history

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I REMEMBER Tan Sri Mohamed Khir Johari from the black-and-white newsreels shown on TV in the 1960s and 1970s.

They showed him visiting schools, cutting ribbons and giving speeches, always smiling for the cameras.

Never a student of history, I only got to know what he was all about when we were working on an exhibition on the history of our young country.

Going through the black-and-white pictures, we found him to be a prominent figure in the country's history.

There was a picture of Khir standing with a youngish-looking Lee Kuan Yew and other leaders at the 1962 Malaysia Solidarity Consultative Committee meeting in Singapore, discussing the formation of Malaysia.

Over the years, during the course of my work, I came across Pak Khir, as he was affectionately known, in corporate and charitable functions.

He was also always seen during functions at the National Zoo in his capacity as president of the Malaysian Zoological Society as well as president of the World Wide Fund for Nature.

It was only after reading his

obituary that I found out that he was instrumental in setting up Zoo Negara.

For that, millions of kids are eternally grateful to him.

At last year's "Road to Nationhood" exhibition at a shopping centre in Kuala Lumpur, I saw Khir and his wife going through the exhibits of historical news and pictures.

While he was obviously not in the best of health, he laboured his way through the exhibits.

When he saw pictures of himself as a young man, his eyes lit up.

I went up to him and said: "Pak Khir, thank you for visiting the exhibition."

What he said touched me and made the effort by those of us in NSTP's resource centre, art studio, photography unit and, I guess, the folks at the shopping mall, worthwhile.

"Thank you for having the exhibition," one of the founding fathers of the nation said.

Khir had been known to lament the fact that many of the young were unaware and unappreciative of the country's history and the sacrifices of the generations before in the creation of the country.