

Serving the people in a big way

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Called to the Bar less than a month before Merdeka, N. Kamala Devi remembers the big day vividly and talks to P. SELVARANI about giving back to society



It was a big family, the parents and all nine children, and the talk at the family dinner table in the late 1940s and early 1950s almost always centred on the coming independence and how the family could serve the new nation.

It was also a time when the thinking was that a girl's place was in the kitchen and learning all the other domestic duties that would serve them well in a marriage, while the boys were to be educated so that they could bring in the money.

But the country's push for independence also saw many a father thinking differently, like M. Nadchatiram who decided that his children, both sons and daughters alike, should study and serve the family and nation.

Kamala Devi, the eldest child, he decided, should become a doctor and serve the people.

But Kamala refused, saying "hospitals depress me" and went for law. Her father agreed.

Being the eldest, and a girl at that, Kamala had to make sure that she succeeded and set an example to her younger brothers and sisters.

(Four of her five sisters became lawyers — Puan Sri Saraswathy Devi Alagendra, Vijayalakshmi Devi, Suseela Devi and Mahadevi — and the one who did not become a lawyer, Dhanapakia Devi, married one, lawyer-politician Datuk S.P. Seenivasagam. A brother, Mahadevan, died when he was 17. Two

brothers, Sahadevan and Jega Devan, are lawyers and the youngest brother, named after the late Mahadevan, is a doctor.)

Kamala, who had her education at the King George V primary school and Seremban Convent, read law at Lincoln's Inn in London and was called to the English Bar in 1956. She returned to Malaya in June that year.

She chambered at Messrs Yong Sze Lean in Seremban and was called to the Malayan Bar on Aug 2, 1957, 29 days before Merdeka.

August 1957 was a great month for Kamala, being called to the Bar early in the month and attending the Merdeka celebrations at the end of the month.

"We drove up to Kuala Lumpur. It was a very nice and grand feeling. The Merdeka Stadium was filled with people," remembers Kamala, 75, who accompanied her father, Nadchatiram, a state executive councillor, and mother, Rajapakiam.

"The Yam Tuan (Yang Di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan Tunku Abdul Rahman Tuanku Muhammad, who became the first king) and his entourage arrived by train from Seremban."

Kamala, like others at the stadium, were mesmerised when Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj punched his clenched-fist into the air and declared "Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!"

"It was a proud moment for us. People were happy because it meant that our country would be run by our own people."

Kamala set up the legal firm of N. Kamala Devi & Co in Seremban and did a lot of conveyancing work as the British were selling most of their rubber estates then.

It was around that time that she got into property development.

"My father had several plots of land in Labu Road and I suggested that we could build some bungalows.

"We built 15 bungalows and rented them out to the British Army."

Kamala then developed another piece of her father's property in Port Dickson before she set her sights on Kuala Lumpur and Klang.

The Taynton Estate in Cheras was up for sale and Kamala bought all 126.4ha of it for RM2.8 million in June, 1966.



This painting of Kamala Devi with Datuk Harun Idris (left) and her late husband, Dr K. Thevarajah, adorns the wall of Kamala's office.

"It was a lot of money then but I took a loan from AIA and built houses, phase by phase. Fortunately, the rubber trees were high-yielding and the monthly income from the trees helped to pay the interest on the loan."

Kamala says she was able to secure the 100 per cent loan for the project thanks to her friend, Datuk Harun Idris, the former Selangor menteri besar, who studied law with her in London.

As the housing project was in the "outskirts", Kamala came up with a marketing strategy to sell her houses — affordable houses and easy financing.

"My single-storey terrace houses were priced at RM12,500 and I went to the squatter areas with my clerk, Loong Ling Shau.

"I told the squatters that they only needed to pay RM2,500 and I would arrange the bank loan for the remaining RM10,000 over 10 years. The monthly instalment was RM136."

The four-bedroom single-

storey terrace houses started selling like hot cakes and Kamala was able to pay off her bank loan in three years.

Her next housing development project was Taman Mutiara in Jalan Kota Raja, Klang.

"But my late husband, Dr K. Thevarajah, did not like it at all and he used to irritate me by calling me 'developer'."

Kamala says her projects were successful because "I do a lot of thinking before I embark on something".

"A good business person must know how to manage his funds. I don't like borrowing because I don't like paying interest."

Kamala has named many roads in her housing estate after those who are near and dear to her, like her father, Nadchatiram, Harun, her second sister Dhanapakia Devi and her youngest sister Mahadevi.

Jalan Arasekesari is named after a cousin,

Jalan Choo Lip Kung is named after a lawyer friend while Jalan Bee Eng is named after Kamala's former secretary who suffered cancer.

Forty-one years later, Kamala is still developing vacant pockets of the former rubber estate which stretches to the border of Sungei Besi.

And till today, she has a hands-on approach managing the day-to-day affairs of her legal firm and construction company.

"Although I have a team of site supervisors and engineers, I still deal with the government departments and agencies myself.

"You could say I am the chairman, managing director, clerk and runner for the company."

Despite her busy schedule, Kamala finds time to offer prayers twice a day at her own Krishna temple perched on a hill across the main Jalan Cheras, which has now turned into a highway, from Taynton View.

Life is not just looking into the housing company and legal firm, or playing the *veena* (Indian stringed musical instrument), violin and singing *bhajan* (Hindu hymns).

For Kamala, whose life has been good in a Malaysia run by Malaysians, has now embarked on a big project for the people — building a hospital in memory of her husband near the temple.

"It will be a free hospital with facilities for every discipline of medicine," says Kamala. "It should be ready in a year.

"This is my contribution to society."

I do a lot of thinking before I embark on something, says Kamala Devi



Admitted to Bar

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — The Federation's first Ceylonese woman lawyer, Miss Kamala Devi Nadchatiram, 24, was admitted to the Malayan Bar by the acting Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Hill, in the Supreme Court here today.

Miss Nadchatiram, daughter of Mr. M. Nadchatiram, a Negri Sembilan State Councillor, was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1956.

A newspaper cutting announcing Kamala Devi being called to the Malayan Bar on Aug 2, 1957