

'WE'LL SUPPORT YOU spiritually,' she says. That's the response she gets when she tries to rope in participants to her various initiatives. The public thinks it might be locked up for getting involved in its own governance, or it might simply not have enough stamina to keep up with Jenice Lee Ying Ha, the International Secretary of the DAP Socialist Youth (DAPSY).

Jenice is a partner in a media consultancy, works 12 hours a day and doesn't own a TV set. She knows people have little time or energy to spare after they swipe their access cards and leave the office. 'When you come back from work, what do you want to do?' she asks realistically.

There is, unmistakably, fire in the way she articulates her thoughts; fire in the way she expresses her commitment to improving the political and social climate of Malaysia; and definitely fire in what she sees has to be done to achieve this. 'Passion' just isn't strong enough.

Her humble Ipoh roots taught her early on that when corruption and incompetence take root, the community takes a beating. 'Every time there was a layoff or retrenchment of any kind, I saw how badly and my neighbours were affected,' she says. 'We were the first to feel the effects of any economic downturn,' she adds, now including her family, who depended on the earnings of her subcontractor father.

These experiences drove her to widen her knowledge of the mechanisms that underpin business and society. One of New Era college's pioneer student batch, she decided on business studies, and found the lecturers open-minded, and the campus climate conducive to taking the initiative. She was greatly encouraged – and found she was not alone. 'There were five or six of us who felt the same way,' says Lee, 25, of those student days.

The political maelstrom towards the end of the last millennium, with Lim Guan Eng and Anwar Ibrahim at

THE WISDOM OF YOUTH

JENICE LEE, INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY, DAPSY
by Majella Gomes

its core, was pivotal to her decision to move more concertedly into politics and to take an active part in helping those increasingly affected by corruption.

Her studies completed, she went to work for Suaram, believing there was a real need to challenge the rationality of the Government's actions. 'I began to understand things better, like the ISA for instance,' she says. 'I realised how resource-rich Malaysia is – so how come there are still so many poor people?'

A short stint in Australia exposed her to a different social system. 'The benefits are spread over a wider base, so more women and children have access to them, for a start. The economic distribution is more equitable. That's what we need to fight for here in Malaysia!'

Subsequent study of economics, government and international relations broadened her knowledge, helping her better understand political workings, and intensifying her community-related work. It also brought her the realisation that 'People have fear because they don't understand' – which showed the necessity for education-based awareness projects.

And what of her role in DAPSY and 'socialist youth'? 'The position involves coordinating international functions, organising conferences, and maintaining solidarity with affiliates like other members of the International Union of Socialist Youth,' she explains. 'We have the opportunity to bring our

campaigns to international levels while localising the content of successful campaigns, particularly those against HIV for example, or the issue of trafficking of women. It allows us to connect internationally.'

She concedes that her early involvement with politics has had its opportunity costs. While many of her peers may be only just starting their careers, Lee feels that politics has been a significant maturing agent. 'It opens your eyes, makes you aware. Malaysians are not encouraged to think, and that has made us uncompetitive and incompetent,' she points out. 'People have to be part of the nation-building process but structurally, the current political environment does not permit them to fully participate.'

How does she think people can be better engaged in the process?

'Talk as much as possible!' she shoots back. 'Do things inside and outside Parliament! The Opposition has raised issues in parliament about our decreasing competence and the need to be competitive, for instance, and for the restoration of local government so that citizens can be more involved with the way the country is run, and we can all have better lives.'

'Speak up; a culture of silence leads to a society with tension. Somebody has to start it, or we may all become victims one day.'