

LEADERSHIP

Datin Paduka Seri ENDON MAHMOOD

- Our Beloved Malaysian Queen of Hearts

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“Come and see me whenever you want, Nellie, just inform Leela or Norma” – these words kept ringing in my ears and I was wrought with sadness and disbelief when the passing of Datin Paduka Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, was announced on 21st October 2005. She left a strong mark of inner beauty, inner strength and inner courage that continues to inspire many in the days following her untimely death.

As wife of the Prime Minister, Endon was determined that the Malaysian mindset about arts and heritage be changed. She knew when she promoted the nyonya kebaya, some people criticised her for promoting Chinese culture but she defended her stand that the nyonya kebaya is a mixture of both Chinese and Malay cultures and that there was nothing wrong if people enjoyed wearing clothes from other communities.

In 2002, through her efforts, a publication entitled, "The Nyonya Kebaya," was released. The metamorphosis of the Nyonya Kebaya soon became a fashion statement amongst the trendy and fashionable in Malaysian society. She was happiest when her husband, the Prime Minister, created the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. For her, culture was not only about dancing but also about values. She also supported the view that the Malay culture should not be 'Arabised.' She said, "Malays don't have to dress like the Arabs, wearing the long *jubah* and white skullcap. This is their costume and we have our own." She also admitted she had been pressured to wear the *tudung* and that her husband was often asked why she did not wear one. "But he said it was up to me," she said. She also wanted to rejuvenate interest in "Mak Yong" and "Wayang Kulit." In 2003, she launched the "Batik Crafted for the World" campaign, where the local batik industry was brought into the limelight with extensive promotions, both locally and overseas – London, Amsterdam and Italy!

She supported her husband's dream to

see Muslims in the country progressing and be known to the world as "progressive" Muslims. "This is what Islam Hadhari means - Muslims should progress and not regress." She believed in the importance of the family unit as well as values and manners but was concerned over their erosion in today's society. She was saddened to see traditional Malaysian values and *adat* such as courtesy and *bersopan-santun* no longer practised. "You don't often hear children say a simple "thank you" or show respect for

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the elders," she said. Endon also took to task celebrities who behaved badly and therefore failed to set a good example to their fans, who were mostly young people. She criticised the compere of an award show for calling her co-host "*kepala otak kau*" (you moron) and another actress cum show-host for dressing modestly, even wearing the *tudung* but shouting and jumping around throughout the show. She said, "If you choose to dress properly and modestly, then you should behave accordingly." She referred to the Malay adage, "*biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*," which was not practiced much. She kept re-instill-

ing these values in Malaysian families and made a strong statement on these values by founding the Yayasan Budi Penyayang, of which she was Chairman until her passing. The Yayasan promoted a nationwide campaign on "Wholesome Family: The Pulse of the Nation." For Endon, family togetherness was the foundation which would strengthen the nation. She put it simply: "If the husband is close to his family, his wife and children, he will think twice before hurting them. A loving husband would not have affairs or marry another."

Ramli Ibrahim, the well-known Malaysian classical Indian dance guru said of Endon: "With Endon, she just gave and gave. You didn't even have to ask. She was making all these changes in Malaysia, important changes. She was fighting for culture and arts in Malaysia, to enrich the psyche of a nation preoccupied with materialism. Endon's efforts reached a broad spectrum of the arts community as she was passionate about both the performing arts and the crafts. Her passing is indeed, a great loss."

I recall when Datin Paduka Seri Endon Mahmood attended an event of the Women's Institute of Management (WIM), where a young teenager, Low Sook Yee, was singing on stage. Sook Yee, was still schooling and the 15 year old daughter of a florist from Seremban. WIM was promoting Sook Yee as an undiscovered young talent, who had a powerful voice and seemed to have acquired the singing style of none other than celebrity singer, Siti Nurhaliza! Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad and Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah bte Mohd. Ali, who were at the main table, were also mesmerised by Sook Yee's singing. I whispered to Endon that Sook Yee would be competing in a singing competition where the prize money was RM50,000/- and Sook Yee was eyeing that prize money to support her further education. I was taken by surprise when Endon responded without hesitation: "If she does not win that prize money, let me know and I will raise that sum for her". What a woman and what a big heart!

Endon's magic did not stop there.

Soon after the WIM event, an unexpected phone call informed us that the Prime Minister would like Low Sook Yee to sing at a dinner for the UMNO General Assembly, attended by the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar, the *crème de la crème* of the UMNO powerhouse! Our WIM Chairperson, Dato' Napsiah Omar graciously agreed to chaperon Sook Yee. It was a great honour and an unforgettable experience for the young and starry-eyed lass from Seremban!

Endon's appreciation of beautiful objects of arts, paintings, traditional materials and crafts is well-known. In her book, *"The Nyonya Kebaya,"* she wrote that she "loves all things beautiful". No wonder that the Thai newspaper, *"The Nation,"* listed her as one of the "Asian Movers and Shakers." Her best friend, Leela Mohd. Ali, said "It is unbelievable how she can purchase a seemingly useless piece of artefact from a flea market or a car boot sale and concurrently visualise it as duly treated décor placed in some suitable corner or space in the house. Her spatial intelligence baffles me!"

I recall her first visit to Wisma WIM as our Guest-of-Honour, when we adjourned to the atrium for the morning reception. I observed she was first admiring our feature wall with a giant spray of hibiscus, our national flower, handpainted on Malacca tiles. Her eyes then moved to our walls (just plain white walls, I thought). Then she said quietly, "Beautiful workmanship" and enquired, "What do you have on your first floor?" "Mostly occupied by our office, a large conference room and a Women's Hall of Fame, where the theme of painted hibiscus continues on the two glass doors," I replied. She turned to the officials at the main table and said, "Ladies, you continue with your tea. I am going to have a peep upstairs with Nellie," to which all the ladies promptly stood up and accompanied our Guest-of-Honour to the first floor.

Her humanitarian fundraising stew-



ardship has touched many lives: fundraising for Dama House and The Actors Studio, which were ruined by flash floods at Plaza Putra, the Bosnia Welfare Fund, the North Korea Children's Fund, the Kosovo Welfare Fund and many local charities.

Endon's quiet but quality leadership did not go unnoticed. She was presented the "*Pingat Tun Fatimah*" by her Majesty the Raja Permaisuri Agong in August 2004. Besides being the Founder and Chairman of Yayasan Budi Pen-

yang, she was also President of BAKTI (Association of Wives of Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers), Patron of the National Child Friendly Healthcare Association of Malaysia, Young Women Writers Association and Girl Guides Association of Malaysia. In December 2004, she was appointed Chancellor of the Open University Malaysia (OUM). The university was developing fast in pursuit of its dreams, which OUM shared with Endon during her brief tenure as Chancellor. A university

spokesman said, "Although her time with us was short, her plans were vast. Talk to anyone who had the joy of knowing and working with her at OUM. Everyone will say she was caring, sharing and nurturing, by word and deed. Her life is her legacy to us. None of us at OUM will sway from her vision. We will strive to pursue her dreams. Dreams of a great lady". Endon laid the groundwork for the three OUM plans. Firstly, the establishment of the School of Lifelong Learning, which opens doors for everyone to pursue a subject, a skill, an arts or science course. Secondly, Endon advocated that OUM give a 50% fee waiver to senior citizens and disabled people. Thirdly, the Chancellor's Foundation was established as a welfare programme to alleviate financial difficulties of learners by way of scholarships and loans.

Endon's greatest act of courage was when she went public with her cancer in 2002. She has become a role model for all cancer patients in Malaysia. After she was diagnosed with cancer in 2001, she had to undergo weekly blood tests and later went to Los Angeles for follow-up treatment. She maintained a positive attitude at all times to help her through her battle - "my family will not see me shed a tear" - and she considered cancer as no longer being a death sentence. She said, "I did not feel sorry for myself when I was told I had cancer. I have full faith in Allah that this has happened at a time when I had just become the wife of a Prime Minister. I now have a better understanding of cancer patients and the need to use my position as the Prime Minister's wife to do more to help improve aftercare clinics for cancer patients all over the country. Yayasan Budi Penyayang has set up its Cancer Patients Unit at Putrajaya Hospital. The Yayasan is also setting up a halfway house for out-of-state cancer patients seeking treatment in the city. Endon always remembered her late father's words, "Always remember what we are, not who we are. Who we are does not last."

"What is most endearing about Kak Endon is her lack of formality and the aura of goodwill that she exudes, making those around her feel at home in her company. She is kind and gracious to a fault. She is a genuinely caring and sensitive "rasika" (one who is in tune with "rasa" and inherently touched by beauty.) She prefers to be surrounded with the laughter of children, people chatting and the happy notes of music. After all, money cannot buy happiness," said Ramli Ibrahim.

"A week before her death, she signed a letter of consent to the director of The

Malaysia (OUM).

"There were still a lot of things that my mother wanted to do. She was thinking of promoting "pua" (the traditional Sarawak textile) and rejuvenating public interest in "Mak Yong" and "Wayang Kulit." I am trying my best to continue her work. I can never fill her "big" shoes but I will try to finish what she had started," said Nori Abdullah, the only daughter of Endon and the Prime Minister.

Rest well, our beloved Malaysian Queen of Hearts.

You have left a beautiful and precious



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Chancellor's Foundation. Even whilst under dire straits, she thought not of herself but of others less fortunate than her and how she could help their well-being," said Kamariah Mohd. Noor, the Registrar of the Open University

legacy of Culture, Compassion and Courage for all present and future Malaysians to emulate. ■

From the Board of Trustees, Members, Partners, Consultants and Staff of WIM.