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Shining as a scientist

By : MEERA MURUGESAN

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That's Dr Nik Nailah Abdullah, a Malaysian researcher working in Japan, who's doing the country proud. MEERA MURUGESAN writes.

HER resume makes an impressive read, enough to make anyone sit up and take notice.

A Malaysian scientist living and working in Japan, Dr Nik Nailah Abdullah is doing the country proud with her achievements.

Nailah, who grew up in Damansara Jaya, may not be a familiar name to most of us but she's certainly making heads turn in the scientific fraternity.

A scientist at the Honiden Laboratory of the National Institute of Informatics in Tokyo, she's currently involved in research encompassing three fields: cognitive science, computer science and software engineering. It aims to understand how people communicate and work together in the context of cross-domain collaboration on the Web.

This is when experts from different scientific fields, such as chemistry, computer science or psychology, come together to develop a product.

It also enables them to share any scientific knowledge they discover, she explained.

Nailah, who has been living in Japan for almost three years, has spoken at many seminars and conferences around the world and is no stranger to awards either.

In Milan last year, she was one of three finalists at the Tecnovisionarie 2008 BlackBerry Women and Technology Awards, the theme of which was "Arts and Affective Computing, Interaction and Dialogues on the Future Web".

Since her research is interdisciplinary, Nailah said one of its most inspiring aspects is the opportunity to work with scientists from different fields.

"It's eye-opening to learn from so many perspectives," she said.

While science is a field that calls for cold, hard facts, for Nailah it's also inspiring and heartwarming because it brings people of different religions and cultures together in the search for answers to the riddle that is life and the universe.

"You develop friendships with the people you collaborate. You start seeing past the labels of race, language and culture. Everyone is viewed as an individual."

Nailah said the life-long learning process that scientific research calls for also involves learning how to adapt to people of different backgrounds, take criticism rationally, argue diplomatically and understand other people's viewpoints.

Living in Japan, the thing that most impressed Nailah is the orderliness and patience of the Japanese, a habit that is reflected in all aspects of their life, whether waiting for a train, buying food or queuing to get into a lift.

"Theirs is a carefully thought out social organisation in which respect for others in public spaces maintains harmony."

Like the Japanese who are renowned for their work ethics, Nailah is totally committed to her work.

A typical day begins at 10am at the laboratory where she first replies to emails, mostly from research colleagues.

"By noon, I'm ready for my bento box lunch and work normally starts after 1.30pm," she said.

Although she leaves the office by 7pm, Nailah continues to work well into the night at home, analysing data, refining her experiments, referring to books and exchanging scientific observations via email or chatting online with colleagues in France and the United States.



Nailah's parents, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad and Datin Nik Noorul Aini Salleh, were instrumental in her success.

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On her days off however, she's out and about, exploring the lesser-known areas of the city on foot or hiking in the woods.

She admits to not speaking fluent Japanese but knows enough to order a good sushi.

Nailah also enjoys reading, cooking and learning more about the culture of the countries she has lived in.

"When learning their culture, I take pleasure in establishing friendships and exploring their food," she said.

The third of five children, Nailah, who speaks fluent French, has two older siblings who are doctors and two younger ones who are still in university.

She said her parents played a crucial role in developing a love for science in the family.

More importantly, they never succumbed to gender stereotypes or traditional notions of boys being better than girls.

Her father brought them up to enjoy science and mathematics, and to be very hands-on. As they grew up, the children began building their own toys and gadgets.

To their credit, Nailah shines in a male-dominated field and never allows gender to stand in her way.

"I love and admire them, not only as a daughter, but as an individual," Nailah said.

Her advice to other young women considering science and engineering as a career is to be courageous, determined and patient.

Nailah said they should be free with their ideas yet remain grounded and respectful.

They also need to find out what areas interest them and seek a mentor to guide them on their scientific journey.

More importantly, she said women in such fields should be passionate about their subject matter and remember that's it's not only the big contributions to science that count.



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