



IN THE RACE: Madam Zuraidah (centre, with Mendaki colleagues) likens the community's progress in education to running a race. "The question now is about putting in programmes that enable them to run even faster."

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PEOPLE &
POLITICS

25 and raring to pick up the pace



As Mendaki marks its 25th year, its CEO takes stock of its

educational achievements as it now faces a new challenge.
Zakir Hussain reports

TAKING pride of place on teacher Norashikin Hassan's bookshelf is a Mendaki award she received last year. It was to honour the 26-year-old's first-class honours in her education degree at the National Institute of Education.

"Looking back, it's a reminder that sacrifice and perseverance paid off," she says.

"And Mendaki was there, giving support, throughout my education story. In primary school, I attended its free tuition classes for two years before my PSLE and no longer struggled in maths. I also went to maths camps in secondary school," she adds.

Last year, she was among 262 achievers who were feted for getting distinctions in their respective Primary School Leaving Examination, O-level and A-level exams, or excelling at Institute of Technical Education, polytechnic and university.

On Sunday, the number of such award winners will rise even further when the Malay-Muslim self-help group marks its 25th anniversary with a dinner celebration.

There is much to celebrate. In 1982, when Mendaki was formed, only 11 students received awards.

Since then, its weekend tuition scheme, workshops and camps for students struggling in maths and science have helped thousands, resulting in the community producing record numbers of top performers in national examinations almost every year.

But this growing pool of high achievers is just one measure of the community's achievements, points out Mendaki's chief executive, Madam Zuraidah Abdullah, 45.

Like a proud parent, the mother of three ticks off a long list of other activities where Mendaki has also made a mark.

They include creating a network of support programmes for troubled teens in need of a listening ear, organising training for youth workers to help counsel such teens, and helping low-wage workers go for relevant training that will land them a job.

Having established its credentials in so many areas, Mendaki is now at a critical juncture of its growth as the community wrestles with a problem that shows little sign of being quelled.

The monster issue: dysfunctional families trapped in poverty.

"My biggest nightmare is that they will be totally left behind, staying static while the rest are moving ahead," says Madam Zuraidah.

What keeps them stuck in a rut is that the parents in such families are typically without skills or jobs because they did not complete their secondary education. Often, they married because the teenage girl was pregnant.

Also, dad has either abandoned the family or is in jail, while mum struggles to bring up several young children, who do poorly in school.

The worst part, notes Madam Zuraidah, is that the next generation continues the same vicious circle.

It is a social ill that has become her main preoccupation since she took charge eight months ago. A career police officer, she was seconded to Mendaki last December for an initial two-year term.

At the root of the problem is teenage pregnancies.

Latest official figures show that 462 babies were born last year to Malay teens aged 19 and younger, which works out to 55 per cent of the total 838 teen births.

Also, almost all the Malay teens did not complete their secondary education.

The dismal situation was also highlighted by Prime

Minister Lee Hsien Loong earlier this month in his National Day Rally address.

The number of Malay teen pregnancies is "far too high", he noted, while urging Malay-Muslim organisations to work with Mendaki to tackle the problem.

It was a call that was music to Madam Zuraidah's ears. "There's no way Mendaki alone can deal with this issue," she says.

Indeed, if granted one wish, she longs for the day "in the near future when the issue of dysfunctional families will no longer be an issue".

In the meantime, Mendaki is studying ways to help these families, she says.

However, she was quick to stress that this move will not dislodge Mendaki's primary mission: improving the educational level of Malay-Muslims. Its specific focus is on lifting the grades of students in the bottom one-third, she adds.

Registered in October 1982, Mendaki is the brainchild of Malay MPs and community leaders determined to correct the bleak picture painted in the 1980 Population Census: Only 679 Malays had a university degree, and more than six in 10 Malays did not complete secondary school.

Swiftly, even before it was registered, a pilot tuition scheme was launched for 60 Malay students taking their A-level exams.

By end-1982, 220 students taking their A levels and 650 primary school pupils were attending its tuition classes.

It operated out of a room at the then Ministry of Social Affairs in Pearl's Hill in its first three years.

Since 1985, it has been based in a four-storey, former school building in Siglap, with 80 staff who coordinate a range of programmes to help weak students do better and low-skilled workers upgrade. It also has a pool of some 7,000 volunteers.

Mendaki has since expanded its tuition scheme to include secondary students. It estimates more than 100,000 students have gained from its programmes.

In more recent times, workshops have been organised to open the eyes of Malay-Muslim parents to the importance of education and help their children do better in school.

"Our community has made huge strides in education," says Madam Zuraidah. "Eight out of every 10 kids in the Primary 1 cohort go on to post-secondary education. It's one of our biggest achievements."

To underline the point, the jogger, who runs at least once a week with several Mendaki staff, likens it to running.

"Last time, our people couldn't even start to run, now they are really running. The question now is about putting in programmes that enable them to run even faster."

Her sights are firmly set on projects that will close the gaps that now exist in helping dysfunctional families.

Currently, there are counselling centres for young couples to coax them to delay marriage until their financial situation improves. A community-wide drive to get teens to say "no" to sex was also initiated last year by Mendaki.

"But why are we not seeing the results?... I think what is missing is an integrated approach, seeing these families through to the end," she says, declining to elaborate on the form of such an approach.

Shrugging off suggestions from some of Mendaki's omnipresence, Madam Zuraidah retorts: "We never want to do everything."

Mendaki has undertaken collaborative efforts with at least 20 Malay-Muslim community groups.

They include: Jamiyah, whose speciality is dealing with the elderly and low-income earners; Pertapis, in running welfare homes; and Ain Society and the Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM) in handling troubled youth.

4PM runs a programme aimed at potential secondary school dropouts, while Pertapis runs a newly opened shelter for pregnant teens.

Mendaki has even joined forces with the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), with which it had a rocky relationship for several years.

The AMP was formed in 1991 by a group that felt Mendaki was too closely linked to the Government, given that Malay MPs guide its activities and its chairman

CEO Zuraidah Abdullah on:

Mendaki's achievements

"Our most significant achievement is that the community now understands the importance of education.

If you look around, you see a different attitude, with parents making sure they send their children to school and get the best education.

Last time, to see someone getting a first-class honours degree in the universities, or Malay students winning awards, was very rare. Now, you open the newspapers, and you can see the difference."

Dysfunctional families

"There are a lot of programmes in place, but why are we still not addressing the issues? I think we need to do things slightly differently... There's no way Mendaki alone can deal with this issue, but I think Mendaki can play a more strategic role in finding out what really is the problem, and work with other community organisations on programmes that tackle it in a more holistic manner, similar to those we have for troubled teens."

Being first on Muis council

"To me, it's just another responsibility entrusted to me, and I have to do it as well as I can, and live up to the trust that's been given me.

That, to me, has always been a job requirement. Gender has never been an issue."

is the Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, a post now held by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, who is also Minister for the Environment and Water Resources.

"It is a non-issue," insists Madam Zuraidah of the past. "They are our partners. I speak to Anuar Yusop, AMP's executive director, regularly."

The latest venture is a programme to coax teens to abstain from premarital sex. It is part of an Integrated Programme for Troubled Teenagers, which provides, among other things, a hotline and five drop-in centres for teens seeking a listening ear.

Despite the seemingly intractable problem of dysfunctional families, Madam Zuraidah insists the community, with Mendaki, should bask in the glow of its achievements.

Indeed, the same can be said for Madam Zuraidah, who lays claim to some firsts in her community.

The eldest of four children, she was the first person from her kampung in old Ulu Pandan to go to university. She has a civil engineering degree from the National University of Singapore.

It was an uphill task, she confesses. Her father was a bus driver and, to make ends meet, her mother worked at three jobs.

"I managed to continue my studies because of contributions from the community: People chipped in to pay for my fees, my textbooks and gave me bursaries," she says.

She was the first Malay woman graduate to join the police force 20 years ago, and rose to become one of two top-ranking women police officers, with the rank of assistant commissioner.

Last month, she became the first woman in the 40-year history of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) to sit on its board.

Dismissing any suggestion of a glass ceiling for women here, she says: "To me, gender has never been an issue. I believe whenever a task is given to you, you have to give your very best."

She is quick to add that the community should also make that its mantra.

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