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Rising above the odds

Five women vie for Woman of the Year Award.

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IN THE face of hardship, it takes strength, courage and sheer determination to rise above the odds.

Five laudable women did just that, succeeding in their respective fields and selflessly giving back to society.

On July 5, one of them will be honoured with the Tun Dr Siti Hasmah – WIM Woman of the Year Award 2008.

Organised by the Women's Institute of Management, the award was first held in 2003. This is the third time the award will be presented.

Organising chairman Puan Sri Siew Yong Gnanalingam says the institute received over 30 nominations this year.

"We were specifically looking for women who had made it on their own. On top of that, we also looked at what they contributed to society," she adds.

"She would also have to be someone who achieved the highest level possible in her own field."

The sponsor is Shell Women's Aspiration Network (Swan), the company's women employees' forum for networking, support and development.

"This award is important in that it really recognises these role models as women who succeeded despite all the challenges," says Mabal Tan, Shell Information Technology International director and head of Swan.

The judges include former Chief Judge of



From left: G. Vimalah Nair, Dr Srivalliammah Narayanaswamy, organising chairman Puan Sri Siew Yong Gnanalingam, Mary Yap Kain Ching, Moy Ooi Thye and Zhahariah Adam. The women are the five finalists of the Tun Dr Siti Hasmah-WIM Woman of the Year Award.

Malaya Tan Sri Siti Norma Yaacob, Securities Commission Malaysia chairman Datuk Zarinah Anwar, NTV7 CEO Datuk Anthony Firdaus Bujang, group editorial/education adviser of *The Star* Datuk Ng Poh Tip, and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia deputy vice-

chancellor (industry and community relations) Prof Dr Saran Kaur Gill.

The winner will receive RM30,000 cash, a trophy, a watch worth RM30,000 from Girard-Perregaux, jewellery from Rafflesia worth RM15,000, gift hampers from L'Oreal

Paris and The Body Shop, and attire sponsored by Khoon Hooi and Lewre.

■ For tickets to the award ceremony or more information, call WIM (03-7725 2286) or go to wimnet.org.my.

G. Vimalah Nair

FROM her third day of marriage, Vimalahthavi Gopalan, also known as G. Vimalah Nair wanted out. Married off after Form 5, Vimalah suffered five years of emotional and verbal abuse by her husband, who was excessively jealous and possessive.

Vimalah, 56, from Gemas, Negri Sembilan, stayed married because her mother believed if it failed, Vimalah's younger sisters would have difficulty getting married.

However, the last straw was when her ex-husband threatened her mother with a stick.

"I realised then that I needed to do something about my marriage," says Vimalah amidst sobs.

Vimalah took her son and lived with her grandfather near Gemas after the divorce.

However, her ex-husband showed up and took their four-year-old son away.

Only after over a year, she found her son in Malacca. Eighteen months, a court case and much anguish later, Vimalah managed to get him back.

When Vimalah reached her late 20s, she was saddled with the heavy responsibility of looking after her seven younger siblings after her mother died of stomach cancer and her stepfather decided to go back to India for good.

As a temporary teacher, Vimalah earned a mere RM270 a month but she managed to buy a house by sewing, giving tuition and making *muruku* to earn extra income.

She eventually managed to enrol in university and obtain a Bachelor of Education from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 1991. Later, she moved with her siblings and son to Kuala Lumpur.

From 1991, she taught at Damansara Jaya Secondary School in Petaling Jaya for 15 years. She later secured a scholarship to do her Masters in Educational Management in Bristol, Britain.

Vimalah opted out of teaching at 48, and did freelance teaching and lecturing.

Currently, she is in the midst of studying and pursuing a PhD in urban poverty.

Recently, Vimalah was appointed special adviser on Indian issues by the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

In addition, she is MIC's women development bureau chairperson and counsels abused women and single mothers.

She was also deputy president of the Malaysian Hindu Youth Council from 1984 to 1996.

For her contributions to society, Vimalah received the Tokoh Belia Wanita (Jabatan Belia Wilayah Persekutuan) in 2006. She was also awarded the KMN title by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong last year.

Vimalah hopes to inspire other women to be strong and hold to values in life.

"If you think you can, you will. Every woman has her inner strength. They should be like lotus flowers which float when the water level rises," she says philosophically.

Dr Srivalliammah Narayanaswamy

AT ONE point in her life, Dr Srivalliammah Narayanaswamy almost gave up hope on walking. She was sickly and wheelchair bound for over a year, downing 30 tablets a day for her rheumatoid arthritis.

However, the treatment didn't work. In India pursuing her pre-university studies in the late 70s then, she came back to Malaysia.

"I prayed to God that if He let me live, I will serve the community," says Dr Srivalli, as she is commonly known.

She tried alternative medicine and coupled with family support, Dr Srivalli got back on her feet. She has since been actively counselling stroke and paralysis patients.

A practitioner of complementary medicine, Dr Srivalli, 52, obtained her bachelor's degree in medicine and surgery from Kilpauk Medical College in Madras, and completed her PhD in alternative medicine (psychotherapy) in Sri Lanka.

She has a diploma in massage therapy from Britain and a doctorate in science (naturopathy) from Sri Lanka. Currently, she is doing research on using turmeric and lemon grass to treat cancer and AIDS.

"Through nutrition, I hope to activate cells to fight the diseases," says Dr Srivalli, who was awarded a doctorate in natural medicine from Weston Reserve University in Canada in 2004.

Originally from Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, Dr Srivalli is also head of naturopathy with the Malaysian Society for Complementary Therapies.

While she was in the United States working for a pharmaceutical company in 1993, her family was involved in a car accident that caused her father to lose his memory.

She gave up her green card and came back to care for him. Her father passed away in 1998.

In 2002, she went to London to further her studies but two years later, her sister's husband was killed in a car accident and Dr Srivalli again came home to care for her sister and her two young children.

Tragedy struck again when her sister was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2005. She died a year later and since then, Dr Srivalli

has been the mother to her niece and nephew, now aged 11 and nine.

Dr Srivalli has been an active member of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS) since 1970. She has been involved in disaster relief work, including leading a team of 11 men to Bandar Aceh under MRCS following the tsunami disaster in 2005.

In the same year, she was part of the South East Asia Regional Disaster Response Team that went to Pakistan to help the quake victims.

Working with children is Dr Srivalli's passion. Together with a few volunteers and retired teachers, they hold activities and prayers with children from the neighbouring schools in the evenings and during weekends.

"Children remember what you tell them. It's important to mould them from young, to teach them about morals and leadership," says Dr Srivalli, whose initial aim was to become a child psychologist.

Zahariah Adam

ALTHOUGH Zahariah Adam went through a bitter divorce, she has her ex-husband to thank for who she is today.

"It was a blessing in disguise. If I see him, I want to thank him for divorcing me!" quips Zahariah, 58.

The gutsy boss of a successful landscape business was left penniless with two young sons. However, 10 months later, she pulled herself together, determined to create a new life for herself and her two children.

Born in Kuala Pilah, Negri Sembilan, Zahariah's own childhood was not easy.

The third in a family of six, she collected wild fruits to sell for extra pocket money and walked 19km to and from school daily because her family couldn't afford transportation.

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Dr Srivalliammah Narayanaswamy: 'Children remember what you tell them.'

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Armed with only a secretary's qualification and work experience, Zahariah started out by going house to house driving a small lorry offering grass cutting and gardening services.

Often working from early morning till late at night, her older son Izzam would also help out at her worksites.

Zahariah remembered how her sons wanted to eat cereal but couldn't afford it.

"They crushed some biscuits that I had bought by the kilo and mixed it with condensed milk, pretending it was cereal," she says.

Frequently away from home for long hours, she also recalled her sons eating stale rice from the day before.

"My heart sank when I found out. I vowed never to let that happen again," Zahariah says.

Zahariah finally got her break when she won the tender for a project with a major bank. That led to other big projects and the rest is history.

She managed to support her sons' overseas education and today, her business has a turnover of RM3mil to RM5mil.

Her younger son Izzwan, a landscape architect, joined her a few years ago, allowing her more time to be involved in charity work through the Perak Ladies Club.

She counsels and advises single mothers frequently, on top of raising funds for other charities.

"Tough times go but only tough people stay," she says.

Mary Yap Kain Ching

FEW people know of the humiliation that Mary Yap Kain Ching had to endure years ago in pursuit of her own education.

From Tawau, Sabah, Yap was sent to Kota Kinabalu to live with relatives after Form 3 to continue her studies. Yap's late father worked as a clerk with the government.

"Sabah College gave free education then, which helped ease my parents' financial burden," says Yap, the sixth child in a family of eight.

However, staying with relatives proved to be a torment. Yap says even the live-in maid was better treated than her.

"She was asked what she wanted for supper but I was given leftovers," says Yap, among other incidences.

"I pulled through because of spiritual strength, believing that God would see me through," adds Yap.

Her parents were her pillars of strength, and she vowed to be successful and give them a better life.

Yap obtained a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1974 from Universiti Malaya on a federal scholarship and a Diploma of Education from the same university the next year.

She started as an English lecturer at the Sandakan Teachers' Training College, Sabah, in 1975. In 1994, she completed her Master of Education (TESOL) from the University of Leeds, Britain.

She was also made Super Principal in 2004, a high honour reserved for a selected few. Her last position before retirement last year was Super Principal of Tawau Technical Secondary School.

In April 2006, the Tawau Technical Secondary School under the helm of Yap was announced as the first school in Malaysia to go into the Excellent Schools Cluster under the Ninth Malaysian Plan.

Yap also wrote a book entitled *From*

Vision To Reality: The Tawau Technical Secondary Experience of Turning Around To Be An Excellent School.

Currently, she is senior consultant at Institute Aminuddin Baki and panel member of the advisory board to the Education Minister on cluster schools.

To date, she has helped countless educationists excel, get their promotions and pass their PTK (Competency Level Assessment) examinations.

Mother of three sons, Yap was the first Malaysian to win the Ly Chanh Duc Award in 2007 for her contribution to innovation and educational developments.

Last year, Yap, a Justice of Peace (Sabah), was presented the Maulidur Rasul Award by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

"That award holds a very special meaning and significance for me because as a non-Muslim, getting this high recognition

means that Jakim (Islamic Development Malaysia Department) is modelling the true concept of Bangsa Malaysia. This is the true spirit of our Malaysian harmony, peace and unity," says the 57-year-old grandmother of two.

Moy Ooi Thye

GROWING up in her wooden house in Buntong New Village, Perak, Moy Ooi Thye would watch enviously as her neighbours walked past her house to go home after a late night show.

Instead of joining them, Moy's whole family would be helping her mother sew buttons onto clothes by candlelight every night.

"I was determined to give a better life to my family when I grew up," says Moy, 62, who has three siblings.

Moy's late father was a carpenter who earned a meagre income.

"We were known to be so poor in our village that the headmaster gave us special concessions and we only paid 50% of the school fees," she says.

Due to financial constraints, Moy was supposed to stop school after Standard Six. Luckily, after being advised by Moy's teacher, her mother decided

to borrow money to support her secondary education.

After Form 5, Moy worked as an administrative assistant at Ipoh General Hospital. After a while, she found the job mundane, unchallenging and low paying.

She decided to go into insurance, hoping that the job will give financial security.

"Everyone in the family, especially my husband, objected. They felt a government job offered better security," says Moy.

In 1990, she decided to take six months unpaid leave to focus on promoting insurance. She met people and talked to them about it, at the same time increasing her knowledge and skills on the subject.

Within three months, she closed many cases and even her husband offered to drive her outstation to attend the courses until she obtained her Bachelor of Science in Financial Planning. May also has a diploma in life insurance marketing.

Moy continued to excel in her field, winning various awards for high achievement. Both her daughter and daughter-in-law are also in insurance.

She is vice-president of the women's section of the Perak Chinese Assembly Hall, and works with various charities including orphanages, dialysis centres and women's societies.

"The more you give, the more you will receive," says Moy, who is also president of Ave Maria Convent Old Girls Association.



Zahariah Adam: 'Tough times go but only tough people stay.'



G. Vimalah Nair: 'If you think you can, you will.'