

# Science, the thread that connects us all

## FROM PAGE 15 NEWSPAPER LEGACY

She was born at home in Ladang Mid-lands during the May 1969 curfew — a time of fear and chaos across the country. Her father, a school teacher with big dreams, soon moved the family out of the estates just two years later in 1971. He built a home not just for his children, but also for his parents and brothers. Wanting to give his siblings a better future, he started a newspaper business for them.

Maha still remembers those early mornings, helping her dad and uncles stuff lifestyle supplements into the main papers at a Chinese uncle's shop every Friday. "I hated it. I was such a rebel!"

But life came full circle. Years later, Maha would launch a newspaper of her own — *The Petri Dish*, which became Malaysia's first science newspaper, spearheaded by MABIC.

"A lot of people say it's empowered them, especially students," she says softly. "Even scientists tell us it gives them visibility, a place where their work and research are seen and appreciated."

Remarkably, the paper is run by just Maha and one other editor. "We don't have any financial support. And we're probably the only ones running a science newspaper in the region," she admits, sighing.

Still, she believes in its power. "It's a tool just waiting to be used — especially by kids. Who wants to be a scientist? *The Petri Dish* can spark that dream."

## JOURNEY TO SCIENCE

Her own dreams didn't come easy. She reflects: "It's been a long journey. I was a shy child with low self-esteem. I could only speak Tamil at one point

and I struggled with Maths and Science at first."

Education was a big deal in her household. Maha, already a determined student, slowly found her footing and her confidence in science. By the time she reached secondary school, she was doing well.

But things weren't always easy. Life changed for Maha and her family when her mother was hit by a motorcycle while walking to the shops in Bukit Kuda. The accident left her mother permanently affected.

Recalls Maha: "My father was devastated. I was just 16, and my sister and I had to take turns caring for her." Her mother, once the heart of the family and her father's biggest support, was never the same again.

Still, Maha kept going. "I think one reason I'm so strong-willed and resilient is because of the faith my father had in me," she reflects, adding: "I'd hear him telling his friends, 'I know her. She'll become someone one day.' That kind of belief... it put a positive pressure on me."

At first, she dreamt of becoming a lawyer. "Probably because I watched too many Tamil movies," she says, chuckling. But her father had other ideas. He urged her to stay in the science stream, saying: "That's where the top students go."

In time, Maha fell in love with science. "I remember reading *Biology: A Functional Approach* by M.B.V Roberts for Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia.. I was fascinated. So much of science was still a mystery — that really pulled me in."

But her father's dream of seeing Maha become a doctor didn't come true. Shares Maha: "I did well, just not well enough to get into medicine

at a local university. Back then, going overseas to study was out of the question — we simply couldn't afford it."

Instead, she pursued biochemistry and microbiology at Universiti Putra Malaysia. "It was disappointing at first. But I ended up really enjoying it," she confides. Maha went on to complete her Master's in Biotechnology at Universiti Malaya — a decision that, in her words, "sealed her fate in science".

Maha began her career in 1992 at Sandoz Agro Chemicals, but the job didn't last long after a company merger shut down the regional office. She moved through several roles — from a programme officer at an international plant institute to working in healthcare companies — but struggled to find her footing until 2003.

That year, she joined MABIC as a project officer and worked her way up to executive director. She gave the organisation a fresh start, connecting it with key ministries, building international partnerships and raising awareness about biotechnology in Malaysia. Her efforts made her a pioneer in science communication.

"MABIC gave me what I'd been searching for — a place to speak up for biotechnology, break it down for others and show why it matters," she says.

## A FATHER'S DREAM

Soon, Maha was beginning to make waves globally — travelling, giving talks and championing science.



Dr Maha remains a passionate advocate for integrating science-based research across industries.

But something still felt off. "They'd introduce the others as Professor this or Doctor that... and then it was just Mahaletchumy Arujanan," she recounts, laughing.

That moment sparked a decision: "I told myself that it's time to get a PhD." She had come to realise that science needed a voice that could connect with everyone — from policymakers and lawyers to regular people.

"I was the first person in Malaysia to do a PhD in science communication," Maha says proudly. But her eyes fill with tears as she adds quietly: "My father didn't live long enough to see it."

She remembers how he once asked if she'd be called Dr Arujanan when she got her PhD. "I told him yes. And he said, 'Make sure my name is on everything you publish.' I told him, of course. How could I leave out his

name? It's part of who I am."

Her father's dream of her becoming a doctor came true after all.

She nods gently. "He passed away in 2011. I completed my PhD at the end of 2012. Just one more year..." She wipes her tears. At first, she didn't want to attend her convocation. But her sister told her, "Appa will be there."

Today, Maha is living the dream her father once had for her.

"Science isn't just for the elites," she says, adding: "It belongs to everyone. Every culture — whether you're Malay, Chinese, Indian or from any background — has always been rooted in science. Our ancestors lived it long before it had a name."

And she's right. Science is part of our shared legacy. And if Maha has her way, *The Petri Dish*, the science newspaper she founded, will keep that legacy alive for generations to come.

"It's been tough keeping it afloat," she admits, adding: "But I'm holding on to hope — that with the right support, we can bring this paper into every school and inspire a new generation to fall in love with science."

In the meantime, she continues to tirelessly champion the cause that shaped her life, speaking to governments, institutions, schools and anyone who'll listen. Because to Maha, science isn't just a subject — it's the thread that connects us all. It's in our food, our culture, our histories. And in her words: "Science is everything."

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With her proud family on graduation day, after earning her degree in biochemistry and microbiology from Universiti Putra Malaysia.



Dr Maha and Raja Muda Selangor Tengku Amir Shah Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah holding copies of *The Petri Dish*, Malaysia's pioneering science newspaper.



At her alma mater Convent Klang, Dr Maha inspires students to explore science and chase their dreams with confidence.