

**W**HEN 33-year-old An-Zurne Ayesya Abu Johan walked across the stage at Universiti Putra Malaysia's [UPM] 49th convocation ceremony recently, it was more than a graduation. The fabric of her gown was light, but the memories it draped around her shoulders were heavy — memories of a mother she would never see again, a grandmother who shaped her early independence and a year that tested every ounce of her strength.

Every step she took echoed the quiet promise she had carried with her through months of physical pain, emotional heartbreak and relentless determination: to honour the women who had shaped her life from the very beginning.

For Ayesya, the Master's degree in Corporate Communication wasn't simply a credential. It was a promise kept to her late mother, a woman whose unwavering ambition had set the bar for excellence for everyone around her — and whose absence made this achievement all the more poignant.

#### LESSONS IN INDEPENDENCE

An earnest Aquarius, Ayesya was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, the youngest of three siblings. Her parents separated when she was just 3 years old. Her brothers went to live with her father and she remained with her mother. Her father's presence was sporadic at best and he passed away when she was in her late teens.

"I wasn't really in touch with him growing up," she recalls, adding: "It was basically me, my mum and my step-dad at the time."

Her mother, the late Assoc Professor Dr Aida Nasirah Abdullah, shares Ayesya, was intensely career-driven. Before becoming a lecturer, she worked with Akademi TV3, later pursuing her Master's at UPM and eventually securing a scholarship to complete a PhD at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), which eventually led her to study at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.

At just 12, Ayesya accompanied her mother to New Zealand, enrolling in the school's international department while quietly supporting her mother in countless small but meaningful ways — most importantly, simply by being there.

"I was there to support her, not because anyone told me to, but because I wanted to," she recalls, adding: "I'd sit beside her in the library from morning until night. She worked. I was online. But I learnt so much just by observing her — how she spoke to people, how she carried herself, even how she managed her appearance."



Ahead of her convocation, Ayesya decided to have a photo taken by her beloved mother's grave, knowing that she would not be in the audience. PIX COURTESY OF AYESYA ABU JOHAN

Her mother could be playful and silly, remembers Ayesya, but when it came to achievement, she demanded precision. She taught boundaries with a gentle firmness: little ceramic figurines around the house were to be admired, not touched. Grades were non-negotiable.

Ayesya remembers studying for a

spelling test one night, repeating the words over and over until she doubted herself — but in retrospect, she recognises the value in that rigour.

"My mother's persistence shaped my work ethic," she muses solemnly.

Her grandmother, confides Ayesya, was equally formative. The Kelantan-born Hasnah Awang was a woman of

quiet strength and independence. She entrusted Ayesya with errands, taking her to the market and maintaining her garden. Even living on campus later for university, Ayesya would return to help her grandmother with errands. Both women instilled in her a sense of responsibility and the ability to stand on her own.

# Grief wore her gown

In her Master's robe, this young woman carried the weight of loss, but also the enduring love that propelled her forward, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

#### DREAMS, DETOURS, AND HORSES' BUTTS

Childhood ambitions were often subject to the women in her life. At one point, Ayesya wanted to become a veterinarian. Her grandmother, practical and blunt, discouraged it. "Are you sure you want to be shoving your hand inside a horse's butt?" she asked. Ayesya laughs now, but the lesson stuck: she would respect the guidance of the women who had always steered her wisely.

With a love for writing, Ayesya confides that she briefly imagined a career as a National Geographic writer — seeing animals without touching them — but ultimately followed her mother's footsteps into mass communications. She ended up in corporate communications at UPM, her mother's alma mater, and in many ways, continued a path her mother had paved.

Even small moments shaped her resilience. In Dunedin, Ayesya recalls carrying 10kg of potatoes on her back ("we wanted the cheapest potatoes"), navigating her way through life alongside her mother.

Smiling gently, she admits: "It wasn't glamorous, but it taught me independence. I realised that I was capable of taking on responsibilities, that I could help and contribute too."

Her first turning point came in New Zealand, where the educational approach was drastically different from what she had experienced in Malaysia. "They encouraged you to think for yourself and to answer creatively. If you gave an answer, someone would ask: Why do you think that? It forced me to step outside my comfort zone," remembers Ayesya.

She joined sports, too, even though she was the only Malaysian on the team. Pride alight in her eyes, she shares that she was selected for "Team A" for hockey and later made the goalkeeper. "I realised my insecurities weren't always real. You only truly know what you can do if you try. If you don't try, you'll never know."

That lesson would echo throughout her life. It became the mindset that would carry her through heartbreak and pain decades later.

#### A YEAR THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Last July, in her third semester of her Master's, Ayesya and her husband were involved in a serious motorcycle accident. Shares Ayesya: "We were coming back from work and was trying to avoid an old man on the road. He was swerving, maybe falling asleep. My husband was going uphill and I was thrown off the bike."

She suffered a fractured right humerus, radial nerve damage and multiple injuries across her face and legs. Her husband, meanwhile, injured his right shoulder and knee, later requiring two surgeries. For months, he relied on a wheelchair and unfortunately, Ayesya, with her own broken arm, could not even push it.

Tasks as simple as writing, typing or driving became monumental. What was supposed to be one surgery became three, including bone marrow extraction from her pelvis to stimulate healing, followed by a second surgery when a metal screw broke.

#### FACING LOSS ALONE

During this period, her mother, who had been battling thyroid cancer for years, faced a recurrence after 13 years in remission. She was hospitalised and undergoing radiotherapy, weak and isolated. Ayesya had been taking care of her mother in between attending classes, preparing meals and running errands. She had learnt independence from her grandmother, but nothing could prepare her for this convergence of crises.

Expression forlorn, Ayesya confides: "I was emotionally torn. Because of my own condition, I couldn't go to my mother, nor could I be of much help to my husband. My aunt only arrived at the hospital on the fourth day to help me shower and by the fifth day, I was discharged. That morning, I resolved to see my mother, even though the doctors had made it clear that no visitors were allowed in her isolation room."

As Ayesya was getting dressed, her brother called. Their mother had passed away. Assoc Professor Dr Aida Nasirah Abdullah was in her early 60s. Expression forlorn, she shares: "I never got the chance to see her one last time. And she never knew about my accident. We didn't want to tell her to avoid burdening her while she was already so unwell."

Continuing softly, Ayesya says: "Since then, part of me has remained in a state of denial. Everything hap-

pened too fast. Even as Mum passed, I was consumed with my own physical recovery, starting physiotherapy almost immediately. Every exercise session — every attempt to move my fingers or lift my wrist — was a stark reminder of how helpless I felt, trapped between grief and pain."

Solemnly, she muses: "It was devastating. It just felt like the world had tilted on its axis."

Yet, even at her lowest, Ayesya found support. Lecturers allowed her to attend classes online, classmates shared notes and colleagues accommodated her workload. Her husband, recovering alongside her, provided unwavering encouragement.

"On days when everything felt too heavy, someone always stepped forward — a friend, a lecturer, a colleague. Their support kept me moving," she says, simply.

#### DEFINING SUCCESS

Graduating at UPM, her mother's alma mater, held deep emotional significance. "For many of my friends, finishing a Master's was probably just another item on the checklist," reflects Ayesya, before adding: "For me, it was a promise to my mother. On convocation day, seeing all the alumni and thinking of her — she wasn't there — it was bittersweet. But finishing it felt like fulfilling that promise."

Ayesya defines success not by comparison with others, but by personal progress. "It's about setting a goal and truly pursuing it. Progress is still progress. The best comparison is with who you were yesterday. Who are you today?"

Looking back, the 33-year-old sees a life shaped by challenge and resilience. Pain, both physical and emotional, has taught her strength she never knew she had. Thoughtfully, she confides: "Growing up, I used to underestimate myself. Whenever my mum said: 'You can do this,' I would respond, 'No, I can't.' She saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, I guess."

The accident and her beloved moth-



Ayesya exploring Otago city centre with her mother.

Ayesya, seen here with her mother, celebrating her first birthday.

er's death crystallised that lesson. She realised that to move forward, she had to rely on herself while accepting help from others. Musings Ayesya: "If I didn't help myself, no one else could. And I needed to be strong for my husband."

As for the future, Ayesya appears to be more reflective rather than prescriptive. "My mother was an extraordinary person," she says admiringly, before continuing: "Sometimes I wonder if I can live up to her example. I'm not making firm plans yet. What matters to me more is being happy, content and contributing to the people I care about — family, friends and colleagues."

True achievement, believes Ayesya, is measured by connection, not just accomplishments. "If ambition comes at the cost of losing touch with the people who shaped you, it's not full success," she says, adding passionately: "I want to keep those relationships intact, even if it means tempering some of my own drive."

#### A PROMISE FULFILLED

"I finished this for my mum," says Ayesya, referring to her Master's. Her



Ayesya with her best friend during her student days at Logan Park High School.



Ayesya with her mother and grandmother during an unrah trip in 2007.

voice catching, she adds softly: "She taught me the value of education and the importance of completing what you start."

The degree itself mattered, yes, but what lingered most was the weight of the journey behind it. It wasn't about doing everything perfectly or reaching some grand milestone, it was about moving forward when the path felt impossible. Some days she barely managed a step; other days she made progress she never thought possible. But through it all, she kept going, quietly with a focus on the people and the life she loved.

Even as Ayesya looked out at the crowd, her eyes drifting slowly to the empty space where her mother should

have been, there was a mix of sadness and peace. She had survived, learnt and carried her mother's faith forward. She had stumbled, struggled and at times, felt utterly helpless — but she had also discovered strength she didn't know she had.

In that moment, standing in the sunlight streaming through the convocation hall, Ayesya understood something simple and profound: life can change in an instant. You cannot always control what happens to you, but you can keep showing up, leaning on the people who love you and holding on to the things that truly matter.

And sometimes that is more than enough.