

Empowered youth

Young people today are more aware of social issues and willing to go the extra mile to rally support for causes they believe in.

By JEANNETTE GOON

educate@thestar.com.my

GONE are the days of the apathetic youth. Today's young person is passionate about social activism, gauging from the turnout at an event to encourage empowerment.

Nilai University College (Nilai UC) organised the Youth Empowerment Symposium (YES) where even tertiary students from various varsities in other states showed up to find out how they could become "agents of change".

Organised by Nilai UC, in collaboration with the Higher Education Ministry, the World Youth Foundation and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), YES is only one of many events designed to gear youth into action.

The two-day event saw students from various institutions coming together to learn how and what they could do to further causes that they are passionate about.

While the workshops were facilitated by lawyer and human rights activist Edmund Bon, there were other presentations being conducted by participants. There was a video conference with April Wright, campaigns manager of a volunteer organisation in the United States.

During the video conference, YES participants were given the low-down on how the volunteer organisation leveraged on celebrities to promote volunteerism among youth. Wright also shared how participants could launch their own projects and gain maximum exposure.

Participants were also asked to speak on topics close to their hearts and the best presentation of the event, according to majority vote, was one on HIV/AIDS awareness, which saw the group of students rolling out ideas on how to improve the awareness on these social maladies in the country.

Group leader Thiban Sandramuti who is currently pursuing his undergraduate degree at Nilai UC, said that despite HIV being a problem for decades, awareness of the condition was still very low in the country, and remains taboo.

Thiban may have been passionate but had never known how to initiate change. Through the event, he realised the level of his empowerment and began to believe that he could make a difference.

"Never have I realised the importance of the roles played by youths until I joined this programme. All thanks to YES for all the inspirational speeches and workshop sessions which served as an eye-opener for me," said Thiban.

More and more youths these days are passionate about projects and activities that may not be related to their studies. Bon said that this was a good thing because "young people have the energy".

In his keynote address at YES, he said that young people have greater influence over their peers than any of the people in his generation will ever have. "And your generation is the one that will propel us forward as we develop together to meet the needs and challenges of the future," he added.

In a lot of cases, youngsters may be unaware of how they can chip in to the causes that they are passionate about.

"This programme facilitates the realisation of the roles and responsibilities of youths which I can never learn in the classroom setting. YES inspired me in many ways to reach out to the community," said HELP College of Arts and Technology student Wong Kok Siew.

UPM Agricultural Science student Khairulfadli Khairuddin added, "My decision to join this programme is a good move as I got the opportunity to discuss matters that are closely related to youth with students from different institutions and different countries."

Others who were already involved in various projects took home messages on how to further promote their causes.

Hema Thenamirtham who is studying pharmacy at Masterskills University College of Health Sciences, said that she managed to learn strategising and planning skills during the course of the two-day programme.

Nilai UC student Ang Chia Seng said that one of the most impactful

sessions during the programme was the Initiating Actions Workshop.

"We were required to brainstorm and come up with an activity related to our selected cause. It required us to think out of the box so that our project would be chosen by corporations," he said.

According to Bon, young people become involved in activism for many reasons. This is why the Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights (MCCHR) started UndiMsia.

"Anyone can join. We give young people the tools to deal with problems that affect them," said Bon, who explained that different kinds of "empowered citizens" who are also known as activists are needed to see a project or cause through.

UndiMsia must not be dismissed as "just another project" said Pang Jo Fan

"UndiMsia is a movement aiming to activate the youth of this country from complaining to acting upon their complaints, claim ownership of their community and be the problem-solvers themselves. UndiMsia aims to build a generation who would take up the ownership of this land and solve their own problems.

"We believe democracy is not something that happens once in five years, but something to be practised every day. Projects under UndiMsia include our MP scorecard initiative in Hulu Langat, our latest #MyMP project where we aim to collect information of all 222 MPs of the Malaysian Parliament, Youth Action Groups and many more," the 19-year-old law student added.

Jo Fan, who started out as a "LoyarBurokker" (a writer on the Loyar Burok website) went for a UndiMsia meeting during the "pioneering days of the movement".

"I did not even know what it was about. All I knew was that I was already tasked with a project on my first day of meeting them, and the rest was history. I would like

to consider myself as one of those accidental activists they talk about," he quipped.

Although UndiMsia keeps him almost too busy to get involved in any other activism work, he still believes in the cause – that youth must solve their own problems. It is for this reason alone that he is still very much involved in the Brickfields Youth Action Group (YAG).

As an initiative of UndiMsia, the Brickfields YAG is one of the many groups which has "chosen to solve its own problems out of its own initiative whether in the local or national scale," said Jo Fan.

"I was involved because I believe in the cause and want to spread this awareness of participatory democracy to my peers at Brickfields," he said.

This movement that Jo Fan is involved in seems like a natural extension of his studies. Now completing his first year as a law student, he says that it is part of his dream to be able to "uphold the rule of law and fundamental human rights in Malaysia and to defend the many people who have their rights under the Constitution breached".

"Through the study and practice of law, I also aspire to educate people on the many rights that they have which they do not know and continue to be oppressed day by day due to this ignorance," he added.

Jo Fan said that while he didn't

think people his age had to be passionate about any specific cause, they still need to be aware of things that are happening and acknowledge that it affects them.

"It will then be up to their 'survival instincts' to do whatever is necessary to fight for whatever they think they deserve, whatever they think is fair for them as a part of the society," he said.

Like Jo Fan, Rebecca Choong Shu Wen, 20, was also "sucked into a crazy whirlwind of events".

However, she states that she stayed committed to UndiMsia because it gave her a platform to speak up and rally support on issues that she was already passionate about. "I could invite guest speakers using UndiMsia as my launch pad, organise an event, and bring people together, all with similar interests to listen and learn. Through UndiM'sia, I was given so much opportunity to delve into whatever cause I wanted, so long as I had the initiative and drive to actually make things happen," she said.

Bon explained that the UndiMsia was modelled after a movement that was initiated for a Latin American community where many of its members were illiterate. However, UndiMsia was restructured to suit the local youth adding that games and interactive workshops were used to get the message across.

Committed:

Bon says that UndiMsia gives young people the tools they need to deal with the problems that affect them.

TO

across.

Committed:
Bon says that UndiMsia gives young people the tools they need to deal with the problems that affect them.





In solidarity: Rebecca (left) holding up posters seeking support to promote a cause with a fellow activist.

Enlightened: Participants listening intently as a student (at the back of the room) makes his point.