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
Malaya Tan Sri Siti Norma Yaacob, Securities Commission Malaysia chairman Datuk Zarinah Anwar, NTV7 CEO Datuk Anthony Firdauz 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, Vimalalathivu 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 it was the only way to get her married. “I really need to do something about my marriage,” says Vimalah amidst sobs. Vimalah took her son and lived with her grandmother near Gemas after the divorce.

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

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

When Vimalah reached the 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 RM70 a month but she managed to buy a house by sewing, giving tuition and making murukku to earn extra income.

She eventually managed to enrol in university and obtained a Bachelor of Education from Universiti Malaysia in 1991. Later, she moved with her siblings 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 Toikoh Billa Wanita (Jabatan Billa Wilayah Persekutuan) in 2006. She was also awarded the RMN 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 Sri Valliammah Narayanasmwamy

At one point in her life, Dr Sri Valliammah Narayanasmwamy almost gave up 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 Sri Valliammah, as she is commonly known.

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

A practitioner of complementary medicine, Dr Sri Valliammah, 52, obtained her bachelor’s degree in medicine and surgery from Kilipak 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 help patients to fight the diseases,” says Dr Sri Valliammah, who was awarded a doctorate in natural medicine from Weston Reserve University in Canada in 2004.

Originally from Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, Dr Sri Valliammah 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 Sri Valliammah 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 2003. She died a year later and since then, Dr Sri Valliammah has been the mother to her niece and nephew, now aged 11 and nine.

Dr Sri Valliammah has been an active member of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MCRS) since 1979. She has been involved in disaster relief work, including leading a team of 11 men to Bandar Aceh under MCRS 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 Sri Valliammah’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 Sri Valliammah, whose initial aim was to become a child psychologist.

Zahariah Adam

ALTHOUGH Zahariah Adam went through a bitter divorce, she has 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, 56.

The gobby 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 Plah, 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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Mo Yee Ho Thee

GROWING up in his wooden house in Bunting New Village, Perak, Mo Yee Ho Thee would watch enviously as his neighbours walked past his house to go home after a late night show. Instead of joining them, Mo’s whole family would be helping her mother sew button onto clothes by candlelight every night. “I was determined to give a better life to my family when I grew up,” says Mo, 62, who has three siblings. Mo’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, Mo was supposed to stop school after Standard Six. Luckily, after being advised by Mo’s teacher, her mother decided to borrow money to support her secondary education. After Form 5, Mo 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 would give financial security. “Everyone in the family, especially my husband, objected. They felt a government job offered better security,” says Mo. 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 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.

Mo 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.

“More you give, the more you will receive,” says Mo, who is also president of Ave Maria Convent Old Girls Association.