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A love of nature...
Jamilah likes lots of parks with birds and small animals.

JAMMING WITH JAMILAH

After interviewing the wife of Johor's Menteri Besar, **FRANCIS DASS** comes away with stars in his eyes.

A FEW hours spent talking to Prof Datin Paduka Dr Jamilah Ariffin pass smoothly, leaving this interviewer easily and readily, perhaps hopelessly, awed.
An elegant woman with an impeccable sense of style, Jamilah is intellectually rigorous and has a great sense of humour. She speaks her mind freely (and as a result has grown into an expert in making clearly defined statements to journalists) and this combined with her fondness for holding court makes her presence immensely enjoyable.
Jamilah is the wife of Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and an eminent sociologist: she is an adjunct

professor at the University of Malaya.
She is sharp, has no patience for gossip, and her life is one that is a result of a deep immersion in academia (she has also worked at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia).
Since her husband became Menteri Besar, Johor has been the recipient of Jamilah's contributions to nation-building, like the 58 centres under the Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti (community-based rehabilitation centres) project.
The PDK centres were set up through Juita (the Johor association of wives of elected representatives) and have been replicated in other states.

The centres provide daycare for mentally-handicapped children, working closely with the Welfare and Health Departments.

They provide special learning skills to help intellectually-disabled children become physically and economically self-reliant, thus freeing the parents to seek employment.

The PDK initiative, launched in November 1997, was Jamilah's first project. Since then she has helped launch almost a dozen more, like children's libraries in all district hospitals, a shelter home for abused children and abandoned babies, and income-generating skills programmes for poor single mothers.

She has also helped initiate activities aimed at reaching out to the elderly and extending learning assistance to children in orphanages.

"My projects start as concepts that I think about quite extensively. I then implement them and after that, I am constantly thinking of how to improve these projects and programmes," she said.

Although on first appearance she can seem a tad serious, Jamilah easily warms up to people and has a dazzlingly elegant smile. Thanks to her fondness for playing the host and holding court, the hours in her company pass by without her guests realising it.

She graduated from the Department of Sociology at the University of Queensland, Australia, having gone there on a Colombo Plan scholarship. She has since consulted for the government and various United Nations bodies.

But her feet are firmly on solid ground. "I like the environment I live in to be clean, have lots of parks and gardens, have water features, with plenty of birds and other small animals running around," she says of her love for nature.

As the wife of a politician, it is the little things that she does with her husband that are the highlights of her day, like playing tennis and watching sports programmes on television together.

She has friends from all the different communities in Malaysia — a quality often missing among many mainstream politicians, let alone their wives! — and is delightfully progressive in her outlook.

Because of her intellectual background, she constantly analyses issues that affect society and cautions: "As a society, we must be relevant and be at the frontier of knowledge, especially the academics. We have moved from a simple to a complex society but the mindset remains largely that of a simple society."

She feels that people from the universities should "come and help the country develop policies. For this to happen effectively, we must upgrade teaching staff at universities and get the best teaching experts from around the world."

One of the things she would like to see is for Malaysia to be on the cutting edge of tropical medicine and herbal medicine.

On the matter of the retirement of academics, Jamilah holds that there should not be any age limit: "As long as they are good and there is academic output, they should remain working".

With that remark Jamilah bade farewell as she went off to attend another meeting on a busy day.

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**JUITA IS AN ORGANISATION THAT
COMPRISES WIVES OF
STATE ASSEMBLYMEN, EXECUTIVE
COUNCILLORS, MEMBERS OF
PARLIAMENTS AND SENATORS IN JOHOR.
IT WAS SET UP IN 1994.**

The wife of the Menteri Besar is the president of the association. Projects undertaken during Jamilah's term:

1. Community-based rehabilitation centres.
2. Children's libraries in all district hospitals.
3. Shelter home for abused children and abandoned babies.
4. Good parenting skills programmes (teaching good parenting skills, child minding skills etc).
5. Healthy lifestyle programmes (targeted at low-income and underprivileged groups of people with the co-operation of the Health Department).
6. Beautiful lifestyle programme (encouraging the appreciation of nature and the natural environment as well as the preservation of nature).
7. Learning assistance programme (i.e. setting up reading corners in orphanages).
8. Sports complex (to instill the love of sports and physical exercise amongst women).
9. Support for the elderly and underprivileged

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Academics should come forward to help develop policy, says Jamilah