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TEACHER TRAINING

Space programme for STEM teachers

BY HANNA SHEIKH MOKHTAR

SUWITI Abd Raneë loves teaching to a T. After graduating in software engineering from Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2004, Suwiti dived straight into teaching to fulfil her passion. As she didn't have any teaching qualifications, she began by teaching at a technology college. It was only after she had completed a diploma in teaching under the Education Ministry (Kursus Perguruan Lepas Ijazah — KPLI) that she began to teach Science and English in school, first at SK Seniong in Simunjan, Sarawak, and later at SK St Mary's Kuching — an all-girls school.

Earlier this year, when she came to hear about the Honeywell Educators at Space Academy (HESA) Programme for science teachers, Suwiti jumped at the chance to apply. According to Suwiti, the application process wasn't that rigorous, but she did have to write three essays in English about her experiences in teaching science, as well as tell of the challenges she faced in teaching the subject. Successful applicants are awarded scholarships, round-trip airfare, tuition, meals and accommodation.

The rest, as they say, is history. Today, Suwiti and 14 other science teachers from all over the country were recognised for successfully completing the HESA programme jointly organised by the United States Space & Rocket Center (USSRC) in June 2016 and 2017.

The HESA programme entails 45-hours of classroom and laboratory instruction, focused specifically on science and space exploration in USSRC in Alabama, USA. On top of that, teachers also participated in astronaut-style



Suwiti Abd Raneë (front row, second from right) with Science teachers from other parts of the world at the HESA programme in USSRC in Alabama, USA.

exercises such as high-performance jet simulation, scenario-based space missions, coding challenges, land and water survival training and interactive flight dynamics programmes.

"I thought it was just going to be a closeted programme where everything would be done indoors, but I was thrown off-guard when we were asked to participate in the physical training," said Suwiti.

"I would say we went through about 15 per cent of an astronaut's actual training pro-

gramme," she laughingly added.

The teachers from Malaysia joined selected educators from other countries around the globe as well the 52 US states and territories. Since its launch in 2004, 2,776 educators from 62 countries, including 25 from Malaysia, have graduated from the HESA programme.

Honeywell Asean president Briand Greer said: "As a leading technology and soft company, Honeywell places a great deal of importance on educating our next generation of scientists

and engineers.

"We all need to keep the excitement of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) — going for the young, because there are real problems to solve. For example, developing truly clean and sustainable energy; cleaning up the environment and solving crippling health issues.

"We have always been obsessed with tinkering, discovering, inventing and pushing the boundaries of what's possible.

"Technology discovery has helped us succeed to where we are today, and the success of our employees, our technologists and our software engineers all started off in a classroom somewhere in the world."

Present to give away certificates and their HESA uniforms was Professor Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid, science advisor to the Prime Minister and joint chairman of the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT).

In his speech, he praised efforts by Honeywell Asean to inspire Malaysian students to study STEM subjects. "It is good that Honeywell is encouraging teachers to show that science can be fun and critical at the same time. It is indeed rare in Malaysia."

Still fresh from her experience Suwiti has helped open her students' eyes that girls, too, can dream of becoming astronauts. At school, Suwiti has set up a mini Space Corner to show what she had learnt in the USSRC. She also has plans to talk about her HESA experience and conduct lessons utilising the knowledge she has gained throughout the programme to students at other schools in Kuching.