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FOR the masses, studying at a public university is seen as the most affordable option but for those in the B40 community, even the low cost can be too much to bear.

Still, that did not stop Tanesvaran Balakrishnen, 21, from chasing his dream of becoming a doctor.

The second year medical student at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said his family faced "serious financial issues" when he had to pay for his tuition fees and living expenses.

"There were instances where my mother suggested that we lease our house or that we should borrow money from our relatives," he shared, adding that his parents – both retired – had worked as a machine operator and a cleaner.

Hailing from Semenyih, Selangor, Tanesvaran said he struggled during the first few months of his enrolment with the little pocket money he had as he could not afford to buy the books or equipment needed by medical students.

He told *StarEdu* it was then he realised the two main challenges faced by B40 youths in pursuing higher education: securing a place at a higher education institution (HEI) and being able to stay there.

Determined not to burden his parents, Tanesvaran applied for various scholarships, including the Tunku Abdul Rahman Foundation (YTAR) Scholarship.

The biggest draw factor for him was the two-year leadership development programme that comes with the YTAR Scholarship. It includes mentorship, developmental opportunities, and funding to run our own community projects.

"It is an all-encompassing scholarship as it covers everything a university student would need, such as laptop, book and living allowances, and even formal clothing allowances," he added.

Tanesvaran said that with the

A dream come true

Scholars hope to inspire peers with resilience



Uplifting lives: Tanesvaran and Siti Sara get a boost in their educational journey through YTAR.

leadership programme, he would be able to serve the community and country, especially in the field of health.

He added that he helped organise a virtual sex education campaign last year on Instagram called "ABC of Sex" to create awareness among teenagers.

"I wanted to make sure that children my age who have caregiving responsibilities have access to resources to make such critical decisions," he said.

Studying medicine, he shared, had not been in his earlier plans but when his mother was suspected of having a lung disease, he had a change of heart.

He recalled having the decision on whether to proceed with treatment, thrust on him.

Without any access to the Internet or knowledge of where to

look for information, he turned to his Biology teacher who explained to him about the disease and advised him on how to support his mother's health.

"It was in that particular moment that I realised the importance of having full access to health information," he said, adding that his father was also not well at the time.

Hospital visits were not foreign to Tanesvaran in his teenage years as it was his responsibility to accompany his parents for their medical appointments, take care of them when they were admitted, and manage everything else in between.

It was a role he managed to fulfil even while he was studying at a matriculation college.

"I would take the bus home from the college to follow my parents for their respective appointments," he said.

Towards creating a better future

The journey to university was equally difficult for Siti Sara Salimi, 24.

In fact, it took the Klang native an additional two years to make it to Universiti Malaya (UM) after completing her diploma in hospitality and tourism management.

Financial difficulties had led the 2020 Tunku scholar to work as a sales and research and development officer at a travel agency around Masjid Jamek, Kuala Lumpur.

Her mother Noridah Abdul Rahim faced serious financial

hardship after her husband passed away.

At the age of 50, it was hard for Noridah to find a job. To keep the family of three going, she sold off her possessions and turned to providing babysitting services for their relatives.

Siti Sara, who is now pursuing a degree in anthropology and sociology at UM, said while travelling via the Light Rail Transit (LRT) to her workplace every day, she would see the homeless lying on the corridors or sitting on the steps around the vicinity.

Siti Sara expressed feeling a connection with the homeless people.

"I was at a low point in my life, I moved to the city at a young age and was struggling financially while trying to chase that big dream," she shared, adding that the homeless were not that differ-



Uplifting lives: Tanesvaran and Siti Sara get a boost in their educational journey through YTAR.

ent from her except that they slept on cardboard while she on a bed.

Feeling bad for them, Siti Sara would give them bread and water, although she did not have much cash to spare. She also volunteered at a soup kitchen.

Meeting them, she said, had helped push her along the path to studying anthropology.

"My first philosophers, teachers, and anthropologists were those whom I met on the streets. If not for them, I wouldn't be here today," she added.

Siti Sara said she badly needed a scholarship to pursue her degree in UM as her National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan and Employees Provident Fund (EPF) withdrawals were not enough to cover her tuition fees and living expenses.

Losing her freelance job when the Covid-19 pandemic hit last year further increased her financial strain.

She added that the scholarship couldn't have come at a better time as her savings had dried up by September.

"The scholarship allows me to refocus my energy on academics and beyond, instead of busying myself devising ways to survive the coming days and weeks," she said.

Like Tanesvaran, Siti Sara wants to create a better future where children are hungry for knowledge, instead of hungering for food on the streets.

Both Tanesvaran and Siti Sara were awarded the YTAR scholarships in September last year. YTAR is a non-governmental organisation that provides higher education aid to all Malaysians irrespective of race or religion, including the YTAR Scholarship, the Tunku Abdul Rahman Study Endowment and the Tunku Abdul Rahman Education Grant. Applications for this year's scholarships are closed. Successful recipients will be informed in August or September.