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Discovering hidden talents

RETIREE Rahmah Abdul Aziz, 79, says that joining the University of the Third Age (U3A) – a programme under the Lifelong Learning for Older Malaysians project by Universiti Putra Malaysia's Institute of Gerontology – has given her a new lease on life.

"I was moping around the house, didn't go out much, and had lost interest in life after retiring and illness prevented me from doing volunteer social work for certain associations I was a member of," says the former English teacher who joined U3A in 2010.

"I decided to give it (U3A) a try after a friend told me about it, and it changed me," she says, adding with a laugh that all her aches and pains and *penyakit orang tua* (old people's sickness) went away.

"You know, when elderly people don't do anything – they don't move around or mix with people – they get into a rut, and the mind and the body deteriorates. So being active again and learning something new, ensures you don't become *nyanyuk* (senile)," she adds.

Rahmah has taken many classes at U3A including art (acrylic, watercolour and batik), language (Mandarin, French and Japanese), choir singing, and photography. She also takes some of the classes together with her husband, such as Agama Islam, car maintenance, air-con repair and plumbing.

"Initially, I took about nine subjects (most students take a maximum of three at any one time) each semester for the first six years. It was crazy but it gave me a new lease on life and made me active again because I had to wake up early just to go out for classes," she adds.

Rahmah reveals that even though she uses a walking stick, she made the effort to go all the way to the campus (in Serdang) to attend her classes before the pandemic. There are also some wheelchair-bound seniors who attend the classes, as most of the facilities are disabled-friendly, she says, adding that although she isn't the oldest student at U3A, she is eldest in most of her classes.

The U3A enables senior citizens to go back to university without the worry about cramming for examinations or submitting assignments on time.

The emphasis is on providing opportunities for retired and semi-retired people to get together to continue their educational, social and creative interests in a friendly and informal environment.

The University of the Third Age offers seniors the opportunity to learn something new online, make new friends, and enjoy life, despite the pandemic.



Siti Safura discovered her hidden talent in floral arrangement during U3A's online classes. — SITI SAFURA MOHAMAD SARIF

Siti Safura Mohamad Sarif, 53, from Seremban, Negri Sembilan, started taking classes at U3A in 2019. Some of the classes that she has taken are baking, traditional dance, art (watercolour) and floral arrangement.

"I'm happy because at my age, I can still discover my hidden talents in painting and flower arrangement. And, I'm happy with the results," says Siti Safura who lives in Kajang, Selangor.

"We get to mix around with people from different backgrounds and make new friends. It makes me recall my school days too," she says.

"It's important for people to continue learning even as they grow older. Learning never stops no matter how old one is. It's good to increase our knowledge and it's good for health too," she adds.

Siti Safura has taken several classes online, namely art (watercolours) and floral arrangement.

U3A vice president Lily Fu says: "After a year-long hiatus for many of U3A's classes since the first movement control order in 2020, we decided to conduct last year's classes virtually during the first six months of 2021."

"Furthermore, Zoom allows us to go nationwide so it's just not limited to the Klang Valley," she says.

"It was tough getting seniors to accept online classes initially but they eventually did. We held Zoom workshops and shared YouTube tutorials to assist them," says Fu.

Blooming success

One of their success stories in online classes was floral arrangement.

"We thought it would be challenging for both the instructor and her students. But it turned out to be a wonderful showcase of how a practical hands-on course can be taught 100% online," says Fu.

Julia Chan from Petaling Jaya, joined U3A in 2019 and has taken several classes including Chinese brush painting, gamelan, traditional (Malay) dance, choir singing and ukulele.

"I believe in life-long learning and now – during senior years – is the best time to master and experience what I've always wanted to," says Chan who is in her 60s. "U3A has given us a chance to graduate from these courses stress-free, at

our own pace."

Learning new things helps us to grow old gracefully, keeps us alert and updated on the latest technologies, says Chan who completed her ukulele classes virtually.

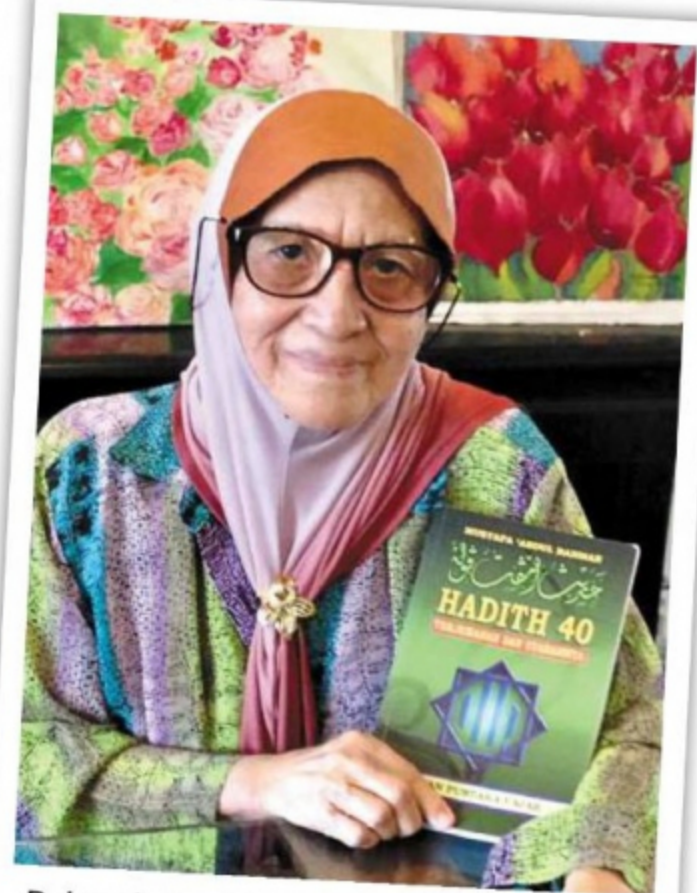
New intake for 2021

Registration for the new semester starts from July 1 onwards and there will be over 50 short courses offered.

"I'm sure seniors will welcome this online learning and making of new friends during the extended stay-home period," says Fu.

"It's been more than a year now since the MCO started. Seniors have repeatedly been told they're in the vulnerable group and should stay home as far as possible. But then seniors thrive on going out for morning walks, kopitiam chats and visiting friends. So, it's really a challenge to remain at home most of the time," she says.

"U3A offers 53 (online) courses in total, covering categories from music and art, to languages and living skills, to keep them happily occupied from July to December," she adds.



Rahmah has been with U3A since 2010 and says that it changed her life. — RAHMAH ABDUL AZIZ

There are 10 brand new courses this new semester, including DIY Repair, Declutter with Joy, Grooming and Etiquette, Charcoal Sketching and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

"Based on the philosophy of 'learning for leisure', there aren't any exams but many courses do have assignments to complete. No academic degrees are conferred, but the members very serious about the learning that takes place," says Fu.

At the end of each year, there is a graduation ceremony where certificates of completion are awarded. There is also a concert where the seniors perform and an exhibition where they can display their finished projects.

U3A is open to all Malaysians aged 50 and above. Seniors have to register to become a member before signing up for classes. There are three categories of membership: associate member (50-54 years old), ordinary member (55 and above), and life member (those who have been an ordinary member for two years or more).

More info at: facebook.com/U3AMalaysia/