

Making education accessible

GAMUDA INSPIRATION AWARD

2022 WINNER

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SEMPORNA: It was a scorching and breezy afternoon when a plea for help took the production team of *The Star* who were shooting videos at Pulau Omadal here by surprise.

"Can you guys give us a lift to the mainland? An aunty hurt herself," said Jefry Musa, 28, a teacher at Iskul Sama diLaut Omadal – a school for the stateless children at the eastern Sabah waters.

The team was speechless while witnessing Jefry pressing the head of a woman with gauze cloth from the first-aid kit and a handkerchief to stop the bleeding.

The incident was just one of the unfortunate events that the Bajau Laut or "sea gypsies" have to face on a daily basis.

They were cut off from access to basic necessities such as healthcare, education and clean water for lacking proper documentation.

The island, about 18km southeast of Semporna, is only accessible via sea route which could take some 40 minutes by boat.

For this case, trained first aiders are crucial to avoid further complications to the patient.

Realising the struggles of the community, Iskul co-founder Chuah Ee Chia decided to help them uplift themselves.

She was here during a diving trip to a neighbouring island – Mabul – when she was approached by a young girl on a sampan.

"I saw this little girl with a beautiful smile, asking for money.

"At the time, I couldn't believe that there are still people who live on a boat," she said, recounting her experience in 2013.

Chuah said she returned to the island two years later for an internship and fieldwork with WWF-Malaysia Semporna after doing her Master's degree in Public Administration at Central European University.

It was during her postgraduate studies that she had learned a lot about the community.

"I saw a group of children playing and one of them named Sakinah can speak Malay. I told her to ask the children there if they wanted to go to school. But they said no. When I proposed for Sakinah to teach them, they all agreed," she said in an interview.

It was then Chuah got the idea of creating a school where children who were educated become teachers to teach their peers.

They started small, teaching basic ABC and numbers at a verandah of a house.

"I was driven by the motivation to be able to communicate with these children," Chuah said, who continued to operate the school remotely.

After a few years, some of the children graduated and decided to return the favour by becoming teachers themselves known as Mastal Arikik or little teachers in Bajau.

Jefry said some former students were chosen as Mastal Arikik based on their own interest and capabilities of teaching younger students.

"The little teachers were selected from the first batch of students who had graduated in 2020. We called some of them back based on their commitment and interest to teach," he said, adding that to date, there were three Mastal Arikik joined by one full-time teacher and a coordinator.

Currently, the makeshift school teaches 35 students, aged seven to 13.

Aside from teaching basic literacy and mathematics, the school also educates students about the environment and basic sanitation.

As there is no access to basic healthcare facilities on the island for stateless communities, the school also provides a mini clinic to carry out first aid.



Yayasan Gamuda head Ts. Lim Hui Yan (right) awarded an additional RM120,000 grant to Iskul Sama diLaut Omadal (Iskul) as they emerged as this year's Gamuda Inspiration Award winner. Aside from basic literacy and mathematics, the school also educates students about the environment and basic sanitation. After a few years, some of the children graduated and decided to return the favour by becoming teachers themselves.



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Jefry said the kids were exposed to the risks of contagious skin diseases such as ringworms due to fungal infection.

"We would provide treatment after the school session to stop the disease from spreading," he said, adding that they also collaborated with the district's health authorities.

To ensure sustainability of the school, Chuah said it was paramount that the children who had graduated be able to run it in the future.

The school is also providing training in future-proof skills such as filmmaking and content creation, funded by the United Nations Development Programme's Small Grants Programme.

"Through these skills, we hope the children and youth can create their own content and upload it to Iskul's YouTube channel. This way, they can share their stories with more people besides earning extra income," she said.

Iskul also collaborated with other organisations including grants from Yayasan Hasanah of Khazanah Nasional.

The grant enabled Iskul to expand their humanitarian efforts beyond education such as providing water tanks for the community to harvest rainwater.

They also started a mini farm using hydroponic methods with help from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Mastal Arikik Bilkuin Jimi Salih, 18, said he wanted to be a full time teacher and help more children to achieve their dreams.

"I want more children to be educated, so we can uplift ourselves," he said.

Another little teacher, Shima Manan, 16, said her passion in teaching would drive more children to have better quality of life through education.

Jefry expressed hope that the future of the stateless community could be improved by receiving recognition from the government.



The team posing with their award. – SAMUEL ONG/The Star



After a few years, some of the children graduated and decided to return the favour by becoming teachers themselves.

"I could only hope that they will be able to achieve their dreams by securing proper jobs and education..

"It will not be as easy because these stateless communities exist but no one is protecting them. They are also not recorded in the census," he said.

Chuah said their future plan includes training 10 community first aiders to provide early treatment for the community.

"The first-aiders will be on standby in case anyone needs medical attention.

"We are also planning to work with the Malaysian Mental Health Association by having one of our members to provide a mental health first-aid and resilience workshop," she said.

For their noble efforts, Iskul is recognised as one of the 10 winners of Star Golden Hearts Award 2022 (SGHA) under the education category. Iskul is also judged as this year's Gamuda Inspiration Award winner by Yayasan Gamuda with an additional grant

worth RM120,000.

Chuah thanked Star Media Group and Yayasan Gamuda for recognising their efforts and that more could be done to improve the lives of the stateless children with the prize money.

"The award really means a lot to us. More people will know about the struggles of the children, as well as their efforts to study and improve themselves to be young leaders.

"We already have a few plans such as expanding on the mini clinic initiative and training more community members to be first-aiders.

"We also plan to train our advanced students to become assistant teachers and increase the number of students in the school," she said.

Watch the video
[sgha.com.my/
2022-winners](http://sgha.com.my/2022-winners)

