

LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

Dedication and balance

Three dynamic mums tell Life&Times how a woman can ensure that her dreams become reality

SUCCESS, it has often been said, comes at a cost. Sometimes, in the pursuit of excellence, sacrifices have to be made. And when you're a woman, the challenge is often greater.

How do you focus on pursuing a career when home life also needs your attention? Many women end up seeing their career go up in smoke when they decide that motherhood and the home come first.

But is it possible to actually have both? Three successful business leaders, two of whom were shortlisted for awards at the recent Women In Leadership (WIL) Achievement Awards, share their story.

DATUK HAFSAH HASHIM

"EXCELLENCE is a habit, not an act. If you're an excellent person, you're excellent at home and in the office," says Datuk Hafsa Hashim at a tea-time tete-a-tete recently.

The affable CEO of SME Corp Malaysia was shortlisted in the Leading Woman in Public Sector category for the WIL Achievement Awards organised by French information company Naseba in conjunction with the 3rd Annual WIL Forum Asia.

The event brings together the most accomplished, dedicated and determined businesswomen in Asia. Award categories included Leading Businesswoman Of The Year, Most Innovative Entrepreneur Of The Year, Leading Woman In A Public Sector, Male Champion Of Change and Most Women-Friendly Employer.

Expecting a formidable iron lady (such is her impressive credentials), I'm pleasantly surprised to find that Hafsa, clad from head to toe in feminine pink, is a down-to-earth, motherly figure with an easy laugh. She talks with undisguised pride about her role in the workplace and with an even greater pride about her three children, the eldest of whom is 29, and the youngest, 14.

"You must know what your priorities are in life and have good time management. Once you are able to utilise them to the best of your ability, you'll be able to get excellent results in all aspects of your life," says the driven Leo.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

"I tend to look at things in terms of concentric circles," says Hafsa about the multiple roles women have



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to play. "They're supposed to excel in their career and how they manage their personnel. They're also supposed to be able to relate and interconnect with others. I look at it in terms of these circles. You picture yourself in a circle and then in the next circle, you have your family. The outer circle is where your career is.

"The outer circle is the entire ecosystem of where your friends and family are that helps to shape you and determine where you're moving. What's interesting about this is that only women as opposed to men are able to interconnect themselves to all those little concentric circles. They assume very different roles when they're in the office or with their family and friends."

These circles, adds Hafsa, are important as they provide the stability that women need to manage

different issues at different times. "Many people say women are irrational but I'd say that women are able to look at things differently, think through the process and be able to manage situations in the best interest of those who are in the concentric circles."

KIDS FIRST

Asked whether she's a perfectionist, Hafsa replies sheepishly: "I am, to a point. I can compromise on perfection provided that my standards are not compromised and that my expectations are met. There's a thin line between expectations and standards."

Turning to an employee seated next to her, she adds: "My officers know that my goal post keeps changing. I adopt the pole vaulting approach — that you keep pushing yourself higher."

It's an approach that she applies at home too. "I'm blessed with three lovely children and I'd like to think that I've been able to inspire them. They know I set high standards for them but yet I want them to be balanced. They should have academic excellence, good foundation in religion and excellence in their extracurricular activities. We have a nice understanding."

Her eyes sparkling with pride under her glasses, Hafsa, who chills to the music of Kenny G and Baby Face, confides that despite her busy work schedule, her kids are her priority. "They all attended boarding school and excelled in their studies, with little intervention from me. But I always made sure that I was there to get the report cards. I took leave to be with them before any big exams, and ensured that I engaged

with them fully. They knew that I wouldn't compromise on low grades in their results. I think watching their mother excel in the workplace has inspired them."

Hafsa confides that although she's a friend to her children, she's still a disciplinarian when the occasion calls for it. "They can talk to me about girlfriends or boyfriends. I make sure I know where they are, what they're doing, who their friends are, but not to the point that I'm intervening into their lives. We go on holidays together. They respect that I'm big on discipline. I don't tolerate towels being left lying around the house! The message I instill is that they must be able to determine which is black and white, and why sometimes it is grey."

CHILDHOOD OF EXCELLENCE

Hafsa speaks glowingly of her childhood growing up in Johor. Daughter of a government officer father (her mother was a housewife), she says she's particularly close to her late father. "My dad spoilt me yet I fulfilled all his dreams except that I didn't become a doctor, which he wanted (laughs)."

The fifth of eight children, she was the son that her father wanted, she says.

"There are five girls and three boys in our family. The four eldest were taken care of by my grandmother because my mum was not very well in the early days. By the time I was born, she was better. I was the first to be totally in the care of my parents. I was rather tomboyish and my dad built a treehouse on a rambutan tree at the back of our house where I'd lose myself in books."

Her parents were strict disciplinarians, she recalls. "We'd be woken up at 5am to go through our times tables and spelling in front of dad. I remember one occasion when

he woke all eight of us very early in the morning and took us to the rubber estate. Then he let us out of the car and said: 'See all those people in the rubber estate with their lights? If you don't study well you'll end up like them... wake up at 5am to tap rubber trees. So study hard'. That woke us up."

Her parents did well, says Hafsa proudly. Of their eight children, six ended up in boarding school. "My dad wanted me to excel in everything. He put me through many challenges, pushing me to achieve great heights."

Meanwhile, her mother, recalls Hafsa, ensured that she had one foot on the ground. "She constantly told me that no matter how high I go, a girl must know how to cook! She engaged me in the kitchen when I was growing up."

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LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

HAYATTAIB

DO you prepare every meal for your family? Or are you the working mother who returns home to heat up frozen food cooked on weekends? "Whenever I decide to cook, (my children) will always ask 'anyone coming over?' as most of the time, I only cook when we have guests," says Norhayati Md Taib, 42, group managing director of Myagri Group of Companies.

Her career started in the Malaysian Technology Development Corporation where she cultivated the technique of bringing research results from the laboratory to the market. In time, she helmed a start-up to commercialise the results from research and development at Universiti Putra Malaysia about the benefits of a soil fungus called Mycorrhiza. This company expanded into a group of microbial-based and biotechnology companies that promote bioscience technologies and solutions for the agricultural and environmental sector, especially for the oil palm industry.

Norhayati admits that it hasn't always been easy to look after a young family while building her company. Referring to a particularly difficult time as the Valley Of Death, she says: "Normally when a company undertakes commercialisation activities, it will run into a phase of uncertainties, with negative cash flow while trying to prove the relevant technologies have proper market potential. During this period, while the funding is sourced from the

public decreases, the investment needs of the company increase. The company may need to look at other options such as equity financing, angel investors and seed funds. Not many companies can exit this phase safely."

As testimony to her success so far, the second of four siblings was shortlisted for an award in the recent WIL Forum Asia 2013. Born in Petaling Jaya, she now lives in Bandar Seri Putra, Bangi with her husband and three daughters, the youngest of whom is 7 months.

As to how she manages to balance work and family, she says: "I get a lot of support from my husband, family, friends and the neighbourhood. Safety is my greatest priority. Being able to leave my kids with a good helper and in a safe neighbourhood helps."

Norhayati met her husband, Najib Shariff at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA. He was working with a Fortune 500, MNC-based company for 16 years. "I finally convinced him to quit and join our Allied Eco-Biosciences Group to head a new venture in Green Biosciences & Renewable Energy," says Norhayati.

The family uses technology to keep in touch. "We communicate through BlackBerry, whatsapp and Facebook," she says. "We stay



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Norhayati Md Taib

in touch on the latest issues, news and games. And, when we go on holidays, we travel together. While my family go as tourists, I always combine holidays with business

meetings."

With limited time on her hands, Norhayati has made choices about which of her children's activities to get involved in. "I try to get involved

in their extra-curricular activities like taekwondo, music and art classes," she says.

"As for the signing of report cards, etc, my husband and sister-in-law Elyana are a great help. For instance, when my second daughter, Amira, was caught doing business in school, Elyana went to the school on my behalf. The teacher, I'm told, said, 'She also wants to be a business person like her mother.' We have now given Amira the title Under-aged Entrepreneur Of The Year 2012."

Norhayati attributes the desire to work in her chosen field to her late father who nurtured her love for nature. "He exposed us to news on technologies, space, animals and took us to Port Klang to see all the big commercial ships. One thing he would ask us to do was to plant trees and to remember our roots in Penang and my mother's kampung in Klang. He always stopped by a waterfall in Perak. He always hoped that the waterfall would be here even when he's no longer alive. He was teaching us how to appreciate conservation and the environment," she says.

"When I was in secondary school, I told him it I would either become a scientist or a cake house-cum-flower boutique owner.

"Precious moments are when I take time to bake cookies for Hari Raya with my children. We also love water activities, whether it's the swimming pool, sea or river. I often call my daughters water ghosts." **Aneeta Sundararaj**

SOPHIE LE RAY

HOW do you go about defending the city you live in? Would you come up with strategies to ambush the enemy? Would you enlist in the army or navy? Would you consider defending it in a holistic manner?

This, according to Sophie Le Ray, is exactly how it was done ... in Ancient Greece.

Sophie, 42, is the co-founder of Naseba, a company that provides industry-specific platforms for high-level executives to meet and discuss business opportunities. She says: "I love to study Sparta and its holistic approach of the defence of the city. The education and legal systems, matriarchal structure, political and even nutrition choices were all geared towards the same goal: Protecting Sparta."

"Spartan society gave a prominent role to women while men fought outside the city walls. It's often seen as a rougher and more unsophisticated civilisation than those in Athens. And I've always believed it is an unfair statement."

Sophie founded the Dubai-based company with her husband, Scott Ragsdale, also 42. "We call ourselves deal facilitators," she explains. "High-level executives are invited after careful pre-qualification to meet and discuss business opportunities around a format mixing workshops, one to one pre-scheduled



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Sophie Le Ray

meetings and networking functions. We do this mainly in emerging and growth markets such as the Middle East, North and East Africa, China, Southeast Asia, India and South America."

This mother of two, who organised the recent WIL Forum Asia 2013, adds: "The forum is the product of my experience as a woman executive

in the B2B (business-to-business) event industry. I noticed that, often, women delegates had a more difficult time networking comfortably with the others. I wanted a platform for female executives and business owners to network, do business and form an international network. In short, a gentlewomen's club."

This is in line with one of Naseba's

core philosophies, which is noticing, nurturing and developing talent within an organisation. This, she adds, starts with gender diversity. In addition to inspiring and supporting businesswomen around the world, Sophie also "hopes to support companies who are innovators in the gender diversity and inclusion field."

"I'm very lucky because running my own business gives me flexibility. Certainly, it comes with other strings attached. But I have the freedom to organise my life the way I want it to be. My daughters are very independent and self-sufficient. They don't need or ask for my help all the time. I spend a good amount of time with them, but they also have their own life, friends and activities, which I do not interfere with and vice versa. It works for us."

All that flexibility translates into the family being able to travel quite extensively. Sophie says: "My husband loves endurance challenges and is a tremendous source of inspiration and support for me. I don't run marathons. I ran a half marathon and the regular 10km races. The truth is, I'm

a terrible runner! But I still persist. I like trekking and the discipline and training that go with it."

A company CEO, an avid sports-woman, a mother and wife: How does she do it all?

Sophie says: "I have great support at home— my maid. My mum, who lives nearby, picks up my little one each day and does French homework with her until I return and help her with English."

"My husband and I support each other in whatever goals each is trying to reach. I see our relationship as a balance of two independent persons with their own needs as well as contributions to the family we have built. This balance is a tremendous factor of sustainability for our marriage."

Sophie's approach to life is inspired by a story about her mother's friend: "She married her high school sweetheart who became a surgeon. They lived a wealthy and comfortable life."

By the time she reached her 40s though, she knew he was having an affair but was afraid of losing her lifestyle. When she did lose it, with no experience or education, she had to reinvent her life. "Adding to her pain, anger and shame, she had to become a responsible adult at 45 but she gave me the best advice: Don't rely on anyone to take care of and to sustain you and your children."

Aneeta Sundararaj