

Zaidah is daughter's 'backbone'



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Zaidah Tamjis (right) lived at the Universiti Malaysia Pahang dormitory for six years with her daughter, Siti Hawa Apandi, who was studying for her diploma certificate right up to her bachelor's degree. -NSTP/FARIZUL HAFIZ AWANG

KUANTAN: A mother's love knows no bounds, no matter how tough the going gets.

This is the story of 60-year-old Zaidah Tamjis' extraordinary motherhood journey caring for her wheelchair-bound daughter Siti Hawa Apandi, 34.

When Siti Hawa was accepted into Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) in 2007, Zaidah moved in with her daughter at the Gambang campus hostel so that she could take her to classes, feed her meals, copy notes and even turn the pages of her reference books and examination papers.

The third of five siblings, Siti Hawa completed her diploma and degree in computer science in 2013 before obtaining her Master's in Computer Science (Software Engineering) three years later and is now pursuing her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

A smiling, bespectacled Siti Hawa, who has spinal muscular atrophy — a genetic disorder that weakens and damages muscle functions — said she never would have been able to come this far if not for Zaidah, whom she fondly calls Mama.

"At UMP, we shared the same hostel room. Mama learnt how to browse the Internet, memorised computer terms and helped me get books from the library.

"She accompanied me to lectures and examination halls and kept a diary for my assignments. Mama was more like a coursemate for my friends and me," she told the *New Sunday Times*.



-NSTP file pic, for illustration purpose only.

Since she registered for a full research master's degree programme in 2013, Siti Hawa was not required to be on campus full time.

"I used to go to UMP occasionally to meet the supervisors for research-related advice and at times, the supervisor would come over to my house.

"Mama still accompanies me to the library and she has become quite an expert at sourcing online information for my PhD research.

"Mama will complete household chores before helping me with my PhD research on soft computing and intelligent systems."

Siti Hawa said due to her limited mobility, it was tough for her to even lift a pen.

"And that is the reason Mama is always by my side. Nothing can replace her unconditional love and sacrifice.

"I am completely dependent on Mama. She is always there for me. She has been my pillar of strength since the day I was born. I cannot imagine how life would have been without her... Mama is my life.

"I am also extremely lucky that my father and siblings completely understand my condition and never complain. I am blessed to have such a supportive family, lecturers and friends,"

On her academic journey, Siti Hawa said she initially had no intention to further her studies due to her physical limitations, despite obtaining good results for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination.

"I never dreamt of setting foot at a university until my former teacher suggested and helped with my online university application. And when I was accepted into the university, Mama immediately agreed to accompany me.

"It seems only like yesterday (since she was enrolled into the UMP) but 16 years have passed. My disability appears to have made me turn studies into a hobby as it provides me with lot of satisfaction...

"I received a scholarship to do my diploma and degree; MyBrain sponsorship programme for my master's degree, and I was given a research grant for my PhD," Siti Hawa said, adding she has not made any plans after completing her PhD.

Zaidah said she never expected her daughter to make it to the PhD level as she never wanted to put any pressure on Siti Hawa.

"Siti Hawa will always tell me to let God decide and we will just go with the flow when I ask about her plans.

"I guess she has proven that disabilities can never prevent one from achieving their dreams including academic success.

"People say I am her backbone, but I believe there were many other wonderful people, including my husband and children, X UMP lecturers and course supervisors, her coursemates and friends who have always been supportive since day one of her campus life," she said as she plants a kiss on Siti Hawa's cheek.

On her sacrifice to stay with her daughter on campus, the mother of five children, aged between 28 and 36, described it as a responsibility given by God towards her daughter.

"It was not a burden but just fulfilling a mother's duties. We never planned anything and looking at Siti Hawa's determination towards her education, I knew it would be wrong to just leave her as my daughter showed a lot of potential... I will continue doing it as long as I can.

"Being a housewife, I never expected to move in to stay in a hostel room in my late 40s.

"I fondly remember campus life and we will sometimes laugh thinking about those days... going to classes with Siti Hawa during hot and rainy weather, eating meals at the hostel cafeteria, group studies and I was like a mother to all her coursemates.

"Those days, there were no WhatsApp chat groups, so I had to be alert in case classes were cancelled or assignments were due for submission.

"I was part of all her course groups on Facebook and now I am included in her WhatsApp groups, including some with former students," she said.

Zaidah, who lives in Taman Seri Mahkota Aman here, said she was overwhelmed when she pushed Siti Hawa on her wheelchair onstage to receive her scrolls and hoped that her daughter's achievement would motivate other parents with special-needs children to help them succeed.

In 2013, Siti Hawa was the recipient of the Heitech Industry Excellence Award, given to outstanding students from the computer science faculty after she scored a cumulative grade point average of 3.88 for her degree programme.

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