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Heart of gold

Gilda Bejani is determined to make a difference, one charity at a time.

By SOPHIA GOH

GILDA Bejani, socialite and philanthropist, is a woman who turns heads. Perhaps it's her exotic heritage, Iraqi-Armenian. Maybe it's her trim figure, the result of gym sessions five times a week. Very likely it's her designer style selections, Prada and Valentino being her favourites. Or, I decide, it's all of the above.

I spot her easily from my vantage point by the window of a coffee place in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and wave. She lifts a tentative hand – a question mark. “You recognise me,” she says. She sounds a little surprised, which, in turn, surprises me. Of all the things I was expecting her to be, self-conscious wasn't one of them.

“I don't like to talk about myself,” she admits over a cappuccino. Doing so feels like she's showing off. “I'm shy. Everybody knows.”

Born in Baghdad, Iraq, Gilda is married to Christian Bejani, who is Lebanese-French. Among the countries they've lived in are Paris, India and Indonesia. They still maintain a home in Paris, but otherwise, they've been in Malaysia for the past 16 years. Their son, Michael, grew up here. He's 18 and will be leaving home for university soon.

How does she feel about that? “People can say something is difficult or unpleasant, but you still have to try it before you'll know. So I'm waiting to try it and see how I feel.”

Gilda speaks Arabic, English, French, Bahasa Malaysia, and her

native tongue, Armenian. She enjoys traveling, and does so frequently. When I ask her about some of her favourite destinations, there is a very long pause. “Bangkok,” she eventually decides. “There's something about the atmosphere, people and service there that you cannot find anywhere else.”

She's not abrupt, the way some people are when they want to get an interview over and done with, but there's a distinct briefness to the way she talks about herself. It's like she simply has nothing much to say.

Then we move on to the subject of her charity work, and it's as if a switch has gone on somewhere because she immediately lights up and our conversation really starts to flow.

On her LinkedIn page, Gilda lists her occupation as “Independent Fund-Raising Professional”. What

that means is she raises funds for charities without being attached to a specific organisation.

She recalls the two biggest events she's been involved in – a Royal Gala Dinner held in London's Whitehall Palace and attended by the Countess of Wessex and H.S.H. Prince Albert II of Monaco to benefit ChildLine and Mission Enfance, and the annual Red Cross Ball in Monte Carlo, which she attended in 2006.

She talks about the tsunami of 2004, and how, when she read in the news that a teenaged boy from Aceh had been rescued after drifting for days, she visited him in a hospital in Port Dickson, and gave him some money. “The poor thing, he had lost 32 members of his family and was the only survivor,” she tells me. Later, she helped him get a place in a local private university so he could further his studies.

When the Pakistani earthquake struck, Gilda helped Mercy Malaysia fundraise so they could buy tents

for the survivors. Once, she learned that an 11-month-old baby needed

heart surgery, so she helped to raise money for his treatment. In 2008, she invited fashion designer Elie Saab to be a part of the Red Ribbon Ball benefitting the Malaysian AIDS Foundation.

“I help where it's needed,” she says simply. “There's this quote by Mother Teresa, ‘If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one.’ I cannot say one cause is better or worse than the other, so I do as much as I can.”

Her turning point came in 2003, during the Iraq War, when she raised funds for Mercy Malaysia to buy medicines. That was her first “project”, and she managed to raise RM53,000 by herself. “It was a huge success,” she beams at the memory. “When I saw that I could do it alone, I was very happy. So I started to do independent fundraising.”

It certainly helps that she's one of the country's most prominent socialites. Having good friends and support is key, and socialising is part of the job. “You have to love the society scene. You must know friends to have contacts.”

It can be uncomfortable sometimes, having to approach friends, but fortunately, Gilda doesn't encounter too much rejection. The secret, she says, lies in the event. “If the programme is good, if there are celebrities and big names involved, people will queue up for it,” she says. “And you must always deliver what you have promised.”

She prefers to work alone, and often does, but she also serves on organising committees for big events. In fact, she's currently an international committee member for a charity gala benefitting the Unicorn Children's Foundation, which will be held at Donald Trump's ultra exclusive Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida, on 16 March next year.

“It's a very rare opportunity for people to experience this exclusive club, and it's for a good cause

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as well," says Gilda. She's hoping to bring along some friends from Malaysia to support the charity, which helps children and young adults with developmental, communication and learning disorders including autism.

I suggest that she's uniquely positioned to do what she does, but

she shrugs it off. "There are others (more privileged than I am), but they don't care. Sometimes I think, if I were in her shoes, I could do wonders."

Why don't more people care? "I don't know." She thinks about it. "Maybe charity is something you have to be born with. There are

some people whom you can talk to from now until tomorrow morning, and they still won't help. But everyone can make a difference, even if it's small things. If you see a beggar, bring him some food or drink. That is also charity."

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