

Headline	Angels in disguise		
MediaTitle	The Sun		
Date	11 May 2012	Color	Full Color
Section	National	Circulation	270,506
Page No	8	Readership	171,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	722 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 12,840
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 38,520



Angels in disguise

As we applaud all mothers this Sunday for Mother's Day, we remember those who have given their all, caring for their chronically ill children, knowing full well that they will soon be parted forever. BISSME S finds out how they keep a smile on their face while they hide their worrying thoughts deep inside.

► NORLINA ALAWI: A HUGE HEART

MOTHERS are angels in disguise. This saying aptly describes Norlina Alawi. She has adopted 33 children, besides having seven children of her own. Her youngest is three months old while her eldest is 30 years old. Most of her adopted children were abandoned, born out of wedlock and four of them are HIV positive. Out of the four children, two have died.

The first to die was Murni at the age of nine in 2009, followed by Uteh, at the age of 11, last year.

"I am not angry with God for taking them away," said the 40-year-old businesswoman.

"Everything in life is fated, and God knows what is best for everyone. In fact, I am grateful that God allowed me to fill their lives with happiness before they died. I took them for holidays. I took them to visit their parents' graves. I cooked their favourite food. They died in my arms... in the arms of a mother who loved them. I have built a lot of beautiful memories with them which I will always cherish."

Her adoption of children began accidentally in 2001. At that time, Norlina was running a successful catering business. One of her sister's friends, a deaf-mute, had become pregnant.

"It was difficult for her to stay in her village because she was unmarried. The community in her village would condemn her," said Norlina.

Out of kindness, Norlina brought the unwed mum to Kuala Lumpur. Only much later did Norlina discover that the woman was HIV positive and there was a strong possibility that the baby might be infected with the virus. But Norlina did not abandon her and after the woman gave birth, she returned home, alone.

"My motherly instinct told me to take the child," said Norlina.

She named him Mohd Iman Roslan. She even became pregnant with her sixth child so that she could breastfeed Mohd Iman Roslan. To her delight, a few years later, the doctor declared Iman free of the virus.

"I felt God had answered my prayers," she said.

Iman had triggered an innate kindness in Norlina.

"I think God was showing me that this is the road I should be taking."

In 2004, Norlina set up Persatuan Kebajikan Anak Pesakit HIV/AIDS Nurul Iman Malaysia (Pernim), especially to look after children with HIV and AIDS patients. She named her centre Pusat Perlindungan Pernim Bhd, but changed it last year to Keluarga Besar Norlina Alawi Bhd.

"I did not want my adopted children to feel like they were living in an orphanage.

"I want them to feel they are part of my

family. I want them to treat each other like siblings."

Initially, her husband, Roslan Zakaria, who is in the army, was not pleased with her idea of adopting children. Their relationship faced some difficult moments.

"He told me what I was doing was utter madness and that I was taking on other people's problems."

It took him more than a year to come around and accept his wife's 'madness', and slowly began to love the adopted children as his own.

There were also insinuations that she was running the centre for glamour and fame.

"I am sad that people misconstrued my true intentions for adopting these children," she said.

"These children faced discrimination but what they needed was love. I simply wanted to shower them with love. If I let this negative talk affect me, I would not be an effective mother to my children."

Last Sunday, she launched *Jelajah Cinta Tanpa Sempadan*, a programme aimed at encouraging Malaysians to follow her footsteps by adopting children. Interestingly, the programme's theme song is titled *Cinta Tanpa Sempadan*, sung by popular singer Siti Nurhaliza.

She also launched her autobiography *Cinta Tanpa Sempadan*, as well as a comic book titled *Kami Anak Mama: Keluarga Besar Norlina Alawi* - both aimed at inspiring more Malaysians to adopt children.

"When you adopt a child, you are not only giving him a roof over his head, clothes to wear and food to eat. You are filling his life with love and values that will turn him into a useful citizen. Now, just imagine if every Malaysian adopts a child, then our country will be a better place."

She is glad that three of her children have started to adopt.

"At the age of 40, I already have four grandchildren," she said with a big smile.

► FAZILAH MOHD YUSOF: A MOTHER'S ANGUISH

THE hardest thing for a mother to accept is the knowledge that she will most likely outlive her children. No mother wants to bury her child. Unfortunately, 42-year-old Fazilah Mohd Yusof cannot escape this tragedy.

A single mother of three daughters, Fazilah spends sleepless nights caring for her youngest daughter, Siti Nur Maisarah, eight, who was born with a chronic lung condition.

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Her eldest daughter, Nurul Nabilah, 16, was diagnosed with diabetes two years ago.

"The doctors told me that a child with Maisarah's illness cannot expect a long life.

"It is a difficult fact for any mother to accept, but as long as Maisarah is breathing, I want to fill her life with love and care."

Fazilah has to be constantly on the watch, for her daughter falls sick easily, and most of her time is spent between the four walls of hospitals.

Maisarah was kept in the paediatric unit for two and a half years after she was born

before she was allowed to go home.

Because of that, Fazilah, who is divorced, could not take on a full-time job.

Financially, she depends completely on the kindness of the tithes fund Baitulmal and on donations. However, the amount that she gets hardly covers her family's daily and medical expenses.

"I want to work, but which employer will give me the freedom and flexibility to take care of my daughter?" said Fazilah.

When Maisarah falls sick, she needs to be constantly watched as her condition is often serious.

But whenever Maisarah is well, the child is full of energy and is always jumping around.

"You'll never suspect that you are dealing with a sick child."

She brought out an album filled with pictures taken during a holiday in Langkawi last February. Indeed the album paints a picture of Maisarah

as an adventurous child.

"Someone was kind enough to sponsor my family trip to Langkawi.

"We had so much fun there. It is one of the most beautiful memories I have of my daughters."

When this interview was conducted, both her daughters were admitted to Kuala Lumpur General Hospital; they were in critical condition.

"It is stressful when I have to think about my daughters' illnesses and at the same time, balance the household expenditure," she said in tears.

One wonders if she gets furious with God for her predicament.

"There were times when I was angry with God," she said.

Now, religion gives her comfort and courage to face the challenges ahead.



Fazilah (right) with her three daughters, (clockwise from top) Nurul Nabilah, Siti Nur Maisarah and Nurul Qamrina.

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Norlina (right) believes in giving a roof to homeless children and hopes to encourage more Malaysians to follow her footsteps