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EXCLUSIVE

A PEOPLE'S PRINCE

BY TRISTAN CHAN

Y.A.M Tunku Abdul Jalil Iskandar (also known as Tunku Laksamana Johor or Tunku Jalil) speaks to MillionaireAsia about his fondness for the outdoors and wildlife, his dedication to working with youths and a curiosity to understand those around him.

Humility, a generosity of spirit and an intellectual curiosity to understand his people: these are the qualities that encapsulate Tunku Jalil's outlook on life. The 23-year-old who is the third eldest son of Sultan Ibrahim Ismail of Johor, says his passion for doing charity and community work piqued when he was a young boy. It was a boundless and earnest curiosity that made him desire to have an impact on a particular community or address an everyday social problem.

Among his numerous affiliations, Tunku Jalil has worked with the Johor Spastic Association, the Malayan Nature Society, the Orang Utan Appeal and Red Crescent Malaysia, where he was appointed as the vice chairman of Community Services when he was 18. With a visible variety of charities, some less reputable and stable than others, how does His Highness identify the ones he wishes to work with?

Tunku Jalil says, "I usually go for something quite established. There are a few charities that I would trust wholeheartedly. For example, The Red Crescent is one whom I have worked with since 2006. My work with them started during the flash floods in Johor in 2007. That is when I started visiting the villagers and going around the shelters. It was a heart-warming and rewarding experience."

His Highness adds that he enjoys making personal visits to understand the varying needs of these charities, "Usually I approach the charities instead and we will discuss together their needs. For example, my work with the hospice was largely thanks to my mom's contact."

Earlier in May, a special gathering organised by the Spastic Children Association of Johor (SCAJ) Laughter Club was held at the club's multi-purpose hall in Johor Bahru.

Over 500 people including cerebral palsy (CP) patients, spastic children, their parents, and association staff attended the gathering, which was held to celebrate the first anniversary of the club. In conjunction with World Crescent Day, the Malaysian Red Crescent community services department distributed free oat porridge to all present, including CP patients.

"It was such a blessing and pure joy to distribute cups of oat porridge to each of the CP children, and watch them smile," beamed Tunku Jalil. "I am saddened by their hardship, but the conducive environment at the association and the dedicated teachers have greatly improved the condition of CP children."

Apart from visiting the less fortunate, Tunku Jalil shares that making both informal and official visits to all parts of the state of Johor was something he was



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used to doing. His Highness says, "Every year, my father and I will make trips all over the state of Johor and meet people from all walks of life. There are times, when I see less privileged people on the roadside waving the Johor flag in the pouring rain. I feel sorry for them but at the same time I feel touched to see their support."

By reaching out to disparate communities of all backgrounds, he hopes to be able to make a mark on the intangibles of spirit and inspiration of ordinary Malaysians. Tunku Jalil feels that there is no stigma or division when it comes to the person you want to extend help to.

His Highness says, "It was not borne out of duty but something I was looking forward to doing. When you have the sincerity to help someone, it feeds the

soul. I am not concerned about race, religion or gender when it comes to helping someone. All over Malaysia, I hope to continue this initiative."

"The price of racial and cultural intolerance has negative consequences," Tunku Jalil added, "it must be made clear that it is unacceptable and that it needs to be taught from a young age." His great fear is that young Malaysians would, given present trying times, develop attitudes of cynicism and hopelessness.

Prejudice against AIDS carriers or those with the HIV virus is something Tunku Jalil also feels strongly against. His Highness says, "With HIV, many Malaysians are conservative and judgemental about it. Obviously, I do not blame them for being scared as it is a life-threatening and misunderstood illness. However, among the youths, there

needs to be better social awareness made through schools and hospitals."

Tunku Jalil's commitment to educating youths and encouraging volunteerism is enviable. This propensity to impart what he has learnt stems from his fervent belief that "we all have spontaneity and an immediate connection when we have the desire to help someone." This fervour is also why His Highness enjoys having exchanges with youths from all backgrounds through social media.

His Highness places high emphasis on using social media tools for storytelling and delivering social messages. Tunku Jalil says, "Social media is a great way to connect with youths. If they see someone that they can look up to, they feel they are capable of doing it and immediately identify with a sense of belonging."



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His Highness adds, "I do not see myself as a role model but with Facebook I use it as a platform to promote an incident or cause – even if I do not have a certain idea of what to do. When I see the response to a status update, it gives me ideas as to how to pursue it."

Tunku Jalil is also inclined to carry out his charitable work in a low-key manner. Indeed, His Highness has risen above the overwhelming weight of expectations to find his own voice in the public arena. "I prefer to do it without any media publicity or attention. I will not walk somewhere and push someone around in a wheelchair

and walk out in a few minutes. One of my earliest memories was seeing a homeless guy outside a money changer in Johor and I asked my mom to give him a few ringgit."

A little-known fact is that Johor is actually the only state in Malaysia to have its own army; Askar Timbalan Setia Negeri otherwise known as the Johor Military Force (JMF), which currently serves as the private army to the Sultan of Johor. With no obligation to do so and out of determination, Tunku Jalil spent two years serving the Malaysian police force (PDRM) and underwent officer training

for a year, which was then followed by Special Forces training (UTK) courses in a technical college in Muar. After the stint with the Special Forces, His Highness also spent time with Pegawai Pemantau Pulupur in Kuala Lumpur.

Tunku Jalil recalls, "It was a powerful experience in building character and sharing camaraderie. There were days when we had to do physical exercises in the wee hours of the morning, have an hour of sleep and then wake up at 6am the following day to do it over and over again. It was tiring but fulfilling at the same time. It was entirely my decision and it was met with disapproval at first."

Apart from relishing working quietly without the glare of media or pressure from government authorities, His Highness is also an avid fan of the outdoors and wilderness. Tunku Jalil's leisure pursuits include travel, among which include climbing Mount Kinabalu.

Tunku Jalil is also devoted to rescuing animals and nurturing wildlife efforts. Indeed, Tunku Jalil is a volunteer at the Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sepilok, Sabah. "I was helping out orang utans, giving them showers and feeding them like they are real-life babies. Due to logging and forest fires, their territory has been destroyed and many of them are left helpless."

Tunku Jalil adds, "Usually outdoors things preoccupy me and make me excited, including being one with nature, trekking or mountain biking. Going to the jungles and islands fascinates me. I have done a lot of conservation work too. This is something that is restrictive because of its cost and as it is not a money-making business, this makes it hard to find sincere and passionate people to join you."

Finding like-minded spirits with a similar motivation may prove to be a challenge but His Highness derives meaning and purpose in wildlife conservation. "When I was travelling in Sabah, I met curious people who would like to volunteer out of their comfort zone. There is a tiger-conservation project where we remove traps and set up cameras as well to capture evidence of any poachers. When the area is scattered, the animals cannot really breathe well. There is also possible danger involved."

Despite his indelible influence on youths, His Highness is quick to point out that he does not consider himself a role model. Tunku Jalil says, "I have made my fair share of mistakes. Every person, as a human, unavoidably makes mistakes. In my position however, it is tricky as plenty of people surround you and are quick to judge and react. Being close to your

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family and staying humble and grounded is very important regardless of what you want to achieve.” His Highness hopes that the youths of Malaysia can aspire to take personal ownership over the well-being of the country, resist cynicism and opportunism, promote inter-ethnic activities and develop their personal capacity.

Tunku Jalil is also a family-oriented man and considers his late grandfather, former Sultan Mahmud Iskandar Al-Haj, as his role model. His Highness says, “My grandfather loved animals too and we share this similar passion. I watched him over the years, as the King, doing his best to fulfill his duty and carry out his obligations to the state and family. Quite frankly, I do not know where he gets his strength. That strength is also something I would like to achieve.”

Tunku Jalil's late grandfather's compassionate and emotional bond is a quality he aspires to attain. His Highness adds, “I remember he wanted to meet my grandmother just before he died. I was touched at how eager he was to visit my grandmother. It really touched me at how kind he was. The respect that he showed her overwhelmed me and left me speechless.”

Aspiring to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, His Highness would like to stay a candid and amiable person, forging productive and robust bonds with his people and those close to him. “I would like to be remembered as someone that touched people's lives and made an impact on them while staying humble and grounded. I am not someone into luxurious things and will not allow it to get into my head. I have seen what money does to people and think it is the root of all evil.”

Tunku Jalil adds, “I wish to be among the people and have good relationships

with the people of Johor. For the rest of my life, I wish to talk to as many people as I can. There are obviously people with much tougher lives than I and I wish to listen to what they have to say. To keep a close bond with others, you need to have a good listening ear and take an interest in the lives of others.”

When posed the question of what His Highness would like to be able to change or do for his country in the future, he said, “I would like to be able to put racial and religious issues aside. My grandmother was a Christian and originally a resident from the UK who later converted to Islam. I admire her as an example and wish for everyone to aspire to learn from that. There should be no barriers or segregation when it comes to wanting to help someone.”

Tunku Jalil is optimistic that Singapore will play a pivotal role in shaping Malaysia's future and growth. His Highness says, “Johor and Singapore have always enjoyed a beneficial relationship both politically and trade-wise. I would love to see the relationship between us blossom further. With the development of Iskandar, ties between the two countries can only get better and I look forward to seeing that”.

Tunku Jalil closes by reinforcing his dream of a more unified society; one that is reconciled through means of closing the rich-poor disparity. He says, “There are now more development areas in Johor; I fully support what the Johor Government is doing because it will help create more jobs and have an impact on those who receive a very low income or who are used to being very poor. With all the many developments that are going on in Johor, it will not just put Johor on the world map but help those in need of a stable job to lead a better life.” ▲



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