

Getting out of her comfort zone

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Most of us would rather jump in the lake than step outside our comfort zone, but academic high-flier, Sofiah Sur and Jamil relishes the chance to take risks.

Her entire career has been one of unexpected turns, pushing boundaries, changing her arm in seemingly alien territory.

The next move into left field comes on Saturday when Ms Sofiah, a research fellow specialising in the environment, will lead the Young Association of Muslim Professionals (Young AMP) when it hosts the Marketplace of Creative Arts.

More than 30 regional participants from the music, theatre, visual arts and poetry world as well as business people are scheduled to attend the event, which aims to bridge the business and arts communities.

It seems as far removed from her field of speciality as possible, yet the 27-year-old regards it as "an opportunity to see how different networks can be linked".

"I'm a social scientist, and so I like to examine how different networks can come together to reach a common goal," she says.

Perhaps the key to Ms Sofiah's approach lies in an old Malay saying she subscribes to: *sedikit-dikit jadi bukit* - bit by bit and a mountain is built.

It seems to have become something of a mission statement for the research fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS), helping her build an ever-expanding field of experience over the past few years, with "the little parts all linking up".

If her portfolio is anything to go by, these "parts" have melded together well.

"Everyone talks about always having a multi-disciplinary approach to what they do, and I think I've been lucky to have achieved that," she says.

She attributes her ability to inter-

ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO
Ms Sofiah Sur and Jamil likes to push boundaries in her career.



Maryam Mokhtar

act with different individuals to the culturally diverse environment she was immersed in during her childhood.

She spent her kindergarten years in an international school in Medan, Indonesia, where her father, Mr. Mohamed Jamil Mohamed Amin, was a Singapore diplomat from 1987 to 1994.

Now retired, Mr. Jamil, 64, was a major in the army before his role as a diplomat. Ms Sofiah's mother, Madam Faridah Hanim Haji Zoohri, 63, is a housewife. She has a younger brother.

Once back home, she attended St Anthony's Canossian Secondary School and Catholic Junior College before pursuing an honours degree in international relations and political science at the University of Western Australia in Perth.

"Living the diplomatic life was really an experience," she says of her younger years. "I really enjoyed getting to understand diverse communities and cultures. I was always testing and pushing my comfort zones."

Her university days, in particular, re-ignited an appreciation of the environment, an interest that stemmed from her days as a Girl Guide in secondary school.

"Australia has a very strong environmental culture. There was a lot of nature, as opposed to the concrete jungle, and I became very conscious of that," she says.

This interest would stand her in good stead when she returned from Australia to join the NTS team in mid-2006.

She started as a research analyst under Associate Professor Mely Cabarello Anthony, focusing primarily on climate change and environmental security.

Her research looks at the human security implications of climate change, and related environmental issues such as health pandemics.

Her commentaries on pressing issues like the haze, nuclear energy and human security, have been published in The Straits Times, The Jakarta Post and other regional media outlets.

She initiated independent research projects in environment-related issues, some of which explored the relationship between Muslims and the environment.

"I was fortunate enough to have a very motivating and nurturing boss, Prof Mely, who allowed me to work on my own research projects in addition to the work I was doing with the NTS," she says of the multi-disciplinary projects she embarked on.

The NTS centre is part of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

Her study of Muslim communities and the environment has led her to believe that there is a need for more "lateral thinking" if the Muslim world is to progress beyond emerging economies towards sustainable development.

"One of the issues Muslim communities have not fully considered is the environment, which can no longer be looked at in isolation from other fields such as business and politics. That won't work in the long run, towards sustainable development."

In 2008, she published a book chapter on the awareness of young Singaporean Muslims towards the environment - Islam & Environmentalism: Greening Our Youth. The chapter was a part of Igniting Thought, Unleashing Youth: Perspectives On Muslim Youth And Activism In Singapore, a Young AMP-produced book.

"I wanted to explore how religion could be used as a factor to raise awareness on environmental issues," she says. "And from there, I would like to see in the future how the environment could be an avenue for multi-faith dialogue."

Her articles produced with the NTS and the blog she set up, The Green Bush, piqued the interest of the United States Embassy here. In 2009, while completing her master's degree in international relations, she was invited to participate in the Study of the US Institute for Student Leaders on Global Environmental Issues.

The international event influenced the conception of Project ME: Muslims and the Environment, another initiative she has launched with the Young AMP. Project ME aims to increase awareness by focusing on what individuals can do for the environment.

The Facebook page for Project ME, started in December last year, has 120 followers worldwide, half of whom come from Singapore.

"It's a small step, but we just need to get the momentum going," she says. "I believe any one can be an environmentalist. Being one is not a profession, it's a passion."