

COVER STORY

Dr Jezamine Lim engineers her o

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SMART, focused, determined and enterprising are words that describe Dr Jezamine Lim to a tee.

A medical doctor by training, the 33-year-old beauty has wowed the nation by being the first female doctorate candidate in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) to be awarded a PhD in stem cells and tissue engineering.

What makes the feat more admirable is that along the 6½-year process, she was managing the career of her husband — actor, host and comedian Harith Iskander — and had also given birth to their three children: Zander Xayne Iskander, 5; Alessandra Jayne Iskander, 4; and Zydane Xayne Iskander, 2.

Not one to do anything by halves, Jezamine said her doctoral journey would not have been a successful one if not for the unwavering support of her husband and family as well as the drive and discipline instilled into her since young.

"I went to Methodist Girls' School in Klang, Selangor. At 14, I joined the national junior taekwondo team and I was juggling professional sparring and school. I had limited time for studies so my parents drafted a study schedule that I had to follow — what and when to study, with emphasis on mathematics. My father is Chinese so he was very particular about me doing well in math," said Jezamine who is of Chinese-Indian parentage.

"After I injured both my ankles, he made me stop participating in taekwondo and it was then I concentrated 100 per cent on my studies."

Her father also emphasised the importance of getting into science stream in upper secondary school.

"My dad instilled this mentality into me: study hard, aim high and get into science stream if you don't know what to do about your future. If you want to fall back on the arts, you can do that any time. But the science stream has more options."

Though she floundered a bit at the beginning, with interest and determination, Jezamine said learning science subjects became easy for her.

"The resources are all there in school — even public schools. You just have to use them," she said, adding that it is up to oneself to go that extra mile. You can't wait to be spoon-fed. To learn, you must take it upon yourself to seek extra knowledge."

And this dictum resonated again when she went to medical school for four years in India as part of her MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) programme at the Melaka Manipal Medical College.

"There the competition was so fierce and resources scarce. In a not-so-conducive environment, everybody fought to succeed. It was my mother's wish that I pursued medicine and my parents sacrificed a lot to fund my degree — my mother is a dental technician and my father is in the import-export industry. I realised then I better get serious and pull through," said the eldest of two siblings.

And pulled through she did.

CHOICES

By following her mother's wish for her to pursue medicine, Jezamine said she was playing it safe as she viewed a medical degree as a



Dr Jezamine Lim receiving her doctoral scroll from UKM chancellor Yang Di-Pertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan Darul Tuanku Muhriz Tuanku Munawir. The cover picture shows Dr Lim with her husband Harith Iskander.

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DR JEZAMINE LIM

launching pad to explore the various facets of the medical science industry.

"I did well in college and I came back to serve at a public hospital. But there came a point where I wondered about other options which the medical degree offers. I talked to veteran doctors and medical directors, and researched the medical industry. I found out that stem cells and tissue engineering are up-and-coming fields, but mostly overseas. The nearest place with clinical facilities that researched into stem cells and tissue engineering was in Singapore. I was already married then and I didn't want to leave the country," said Jezamine.

So, she sought the opinion of Monash University Malaysia's Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khalid Abdul Kadir, the former director of UKM Medical Centre, and also consulted Tan Sri Dr Ridwan Bakar, the cardiologist attending to Harith's late mother.

"I had this vision of growing organs in a lab but I was newly married and I didn't want to leave my family. And I was trying to find my voice professionally in the medical field."

Jezamine then met UKM Tissue Engineering Centre (TEC) founder Professor Datuk Dr Ruszymah Idrus. TEC is devoted to exploring the capability of translating tissue engineering and regenerative medicine into new medical therapies. And as luck would have it, the centre had just started the stem cells and tissue engineering master's and doctoral programmes.

So, Jezamine applied to join the master's

programme and was accepted with Dr Ruszymah and TEC head Associate Professor Dr Angela Ng Min Hwei as co-supervisors. But it was not an easy start for Jezamine.

"I knew I wanted to research stem cells but I didn't know which. I cultivated all the stem cells that I could find in the first nine months. Then I realised that I wanted to focus on Wharton's jelly, a gelatinous substance within the umbilical cord from which stem cells can be extracted."

Dr Ng then offered a conversion of her master's programme into a PhD course. "I had no intention of pursuing a doctoral course when I joined the programme. But as I only had one child then, I agreed to the conversion," she said with a grin.

And two months after the conversion, Jezamine found herself pregnant with her second child.

DOCTORAL JOURNEY

For her doctoral programme, Jezamine had to do everything from scratch — from finding her way around the Lab to locating specimens for research, taking samples and making the medium for growing the cells.

"The programme is designed to train the student to scientifically study and report findings in a research topic in the tissue engineering field. While my supervisors guided me, I had to find out things for myself."

"I worked on my doctoral course full-time but felt that I did not have enough time. It was so much work. I started as early as 7am at