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Nazariah Sahu Palar



HARNESSING THE RESOURCES OF DEAKIN UNIVERSITY'S INDONESIAN ALUMNI, NAZARIAH SAHU PALAR IS WORKING TO REBUILD THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN ACEH, FOLLOWING THE DEVASTATING 2004 TSUNAMI. NAZARIAH SHARES HER VERY PERSONAL QUEST.

When Nazariah Sahu Palar learned that in Aceh, the Indonesian province where she grew up, around 3,500 teachers and educators perished in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, she knew she had to do something. For this passionate young teacher, the idea of a generation of children missing out on a decent education was unthinkable. So, together with a group of Deakin Indonesian alumni, she set about making sure that education wouldn't end up being the invisible casualty of the natural disaster.

In December 2004, Nazariah was working as a teacher at the local high school as well as at a private education centre. On the morning of the tsunami, she was out exercising with friends. Nazariah felt the earthquake but had no idea what was to come.

'When we heard there was a tsunami we thought it was impossible!' she remembers. 'We had never heard of a tsunami except in Japan. Just before communications went down I got a call from a friend who was very close to it who said the Aceh Shopping Centre had just collapsed and I thought, no way!'

While Nazariah's town was safe from the sea, it wasn't spared the

impact of the tsunami. 'My town is about eight hours from the capital city Banda Aceh so we didn't get the tsunami, but a lot of the victims came to my town because it is very safe, so there were people everywhere.'

Teaching the traumatised children of the tsunami was harrowing. 'Some students from the tsunami areas came to my school and we had some students who were experiencing issues. I don't like to use this word, but they were like zombies. It was hard to teach them, they didn't want to talk and they were reluctant to take part in study. Some of the students had no accommodation, no transport.'

Nazariah was concerned about what impact the loss of so many educators would have on the education system in Aceh and feared that the children who were already suffering would be further disadvantaged. 'I wanted the opportunity to contribute in some way to the rebuilding of the Aceh education system,' she says.

'The provincial government of Aceh had a memorandum of understanding with Deakin University that they would send some students to Deakin - about 50 students - from 2009. So I came to Australia and studied

at the Melbourne Burwood Campus and in 2010 I graduated with the degree of Master of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.'

On her return to Indonesia, Nazariah brought together a large group of Deakin alumni living in the country, and together, they began to offer professional development opportunities for teachers.

Working as part of a partnership between Deakin University and the Indonesian Government, they devised a course structure for using English as the language of instruction in class.

At the time, the Indonesian Government was running a program to raise the level of education in its country, and was encouraging and rewarding schools that taught in English. 'That's why we tried to help the teachers who don't have a background in teaching in English,' explains Nazariah.

'We constructed a two-week course for all teachers - science teachers, mathematics teachers, and also English teachers - on how to use English for instruction in class. This was well-received,' she explains.

The project trialled in Nazariah's hometown, and soon the alumni had expanded it to include a component that would help disadvantaged children.

'We invited students from junior high school, who were disadvantaged, to come to our centre,' says Nazariah. 'We asked every school to send at least five students who had never undertaken an English course so we could give them an opportunity. So what we are doing is not just teaching, it is also assisting the wider community.'

Nazariah's desire to encourage and facilitate the education of children in her province is a deeply personal quest.

'My parents were not from an academic family,' she explains. 'I wanted to have an education but my parents couldn't support me. After senior high school I didn't go to university. I had a scholarship to go to university in Banda Aceh, but for cultural reasons, my parents thought it wasn't suitable for a girl. I knew I could do it, but no one would support me!

'I was working,' she says. 'I went to a school and they didn't have a sports teacher and I had done a little bit of sports so I said, 'I can do sports!' During that job I fell in love with teaching and then the next year I decided to go to a local university to do my teaching degree.'

While teaching at a local school, Nazariah became committed to encouraging her students to study, especially those who, like her, were doing it despite limited support.

'With some of the students, their parents weren't very encouraging and when it came to exam time we would go a long way to pick them up and I would say to the parents, "Just wait one more week until exams are finished then you can have your child back!"'

It was while studying at Deakin that Nazariah had what she calls her 'ah-ha' moment. 'It suddenly all came together for me. All the things that happened in my life. I gained some theories and rationales to support what I did, and knew what I had to do in the future.'

Nazariah's commitment to giving back has been passed on to her students. 'I call my students my soldiers because they will do anything. They don't worry about payment, they accept what they can. They have built an organisation that is a voluntary one and is supporting students and their communities whenever they can.

'I always think: if I give you money you may spend it in one day but if I give you experience and learning it will last your whole life.'

In 2011, Nazariah Sahu Palar was honoured with the Deakin Alumni of the Year Award.

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Post-tsunami devastation.

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