

Children are our future

THE taste of starvation never goes away. Neither does the memory of kindness from neighbours who discreetly left food for a family oppressed and shunned by political change.

That childhood experience created MyKasih Foundation founder and chairman Tan Sri Dr Ngau Boon Keat's vision of the non-profit organisation, which has drawn on Corporate Malaysia to help feed the poorest of the poor and give them a leg-up in life.

Now in its 10th year, the foundation has helped an amazing 280,000 families and schoolchildren to get aid through its cashless programmes. Using proprietary software developed by Dialog Group, an oil and gas service provider of which Ngau is executive chairman, the foundation enables needy families all over Malaysia to shop for food using their MyKad. In a parallel programme, schoolchildren use a dedicated smartcard to get food, books and school supplies.

For Ngau, the satisfaction is beyond words. "I never imagined this. We started with 25 families. I thought it was going to be a simple charitable set-up but then the numbers kept growing and growing. The more we helped, the more determined we became to help. And no, we are not going to run out of people because every day, a new family in need emerges."

At the root of MyKasih's success, says Ngau, is all the right people being in the right place at the right time.

A talented group of techies at Dialog Group had developed the MyKad cashless payment system for the purpose of providing a solution to the government's petrol subsidy programme several years ago. The government eventually opted not to use the system.

It was then decided that the cashless system would be used for MyKasih's charity work. This quickly got the support of key individuals such as the then MDEC chief Datuk Badlisham Ghazali, Bank Negara Malaysia assistant governor at the time, Datuk Nor Shamsiah Yunus (now governor), and the then National Registration Department director-general Tan Sri Alwi Ibrahim. These three agencies, independent of each other, were the national custodians of the tech on the card, the payment systems and MyKad. Their approval was crucial.

"I have been privileged to work with amazing professionals who demonstrated insight and compassion when they made all this possible," says Ngau.

"The best part is the transparency that gives donors great satisfaction. I'm really proud of this. It motivates me."

*Tan Sri Dr Ngau Boon Keat,
MyKasih chairman*

Ngau brought in trustees with excellent track records and credentials, people he believed to be trustworthy. Their ideas, he says, have strengthened the foundation, as have the staff who manage MyKasih daily with back-up from Dialog Group. On the ground, says Ngau, are NGOs and government agencies that collaborate with MyKasih.

In the years ahead, Ngau foresees a steady flow of more aid and programmes to Malaysia's children. While food aid will continue, bigger investments will be directed at schoolchildren. "Particularly rural schools," says Ngau. "It's clear that many schools and schoolchildren need strategic assistance to bring them up to speed with other schools in Malaysia."

The strategic assistance Ngau speaks of has two prongs. One, IT skills, familiarity with computers and software, and fitting into the Fourth Industrial Revolution because in the big picture is the need to create skilled Malaysians for the jobs generated by businessmen like Ngau. The other prong — still a challenging one — is simply getting children to actually stay in school and to be interested in learning. "We cannot always be a nation of consumers and foreign workers. Malaysians have to be skilled and it starts with our children. Every child must know how to use a computer and be IT-savvy," says Ngau.

The signs are there. Where MyKasih aid has penetrated a school, attendance has spiked and the motivation seems to have affected everyone, from the teachers to the parents and the community. People, says Ngau, want a chance to do well and most know that education is the game changer. That is why the MyKasih team is looking forward to more partnerships with technical training centres and other educational institutions.

When MyKasih was in its formative years, Ngau attended almost every event related to it to understand what B40 Malaysians really needed. "I've lost count of the emotional moments. Like the brothers in Tanjung Malim who shared

one school uniform and one pair of shoes as they attended the morning and afternoon sessions. That's all they needed, some uniforms. They were doing their best to attend school. One lady was having cancer when we stepped in with help. In remission, she started a sewing business. Later, her children went to university. Just one person but what a big difference to the family and our society."

Each of these stories is a reminder of his childhood. Born in Guangdong province, Ngau's early years were defined by his difficult experience. The government's enforced reforms made landowners like Ngau's family enemies of the state. His family was helped by kindly neighbours who discreetly left food for them.

Having experienced starvation in China and witnessed the torture of relatives, Ngau and his family fled to Malaysia and made a life for themselves. His mother frequently reminded him that an education would be his salvation.

Ngau likes to tell his story to donors and recipients because the bottom line, he says, is that people need to learn to fish. He also wants to go into the region. Pilot programmes in Indonesia and Thailand using smartcards have worked well and will likely be expanded.

MyKasih won the UN Malaysia Award 2018 for the Leaving No One Behind category, which honoured its governance in welfare distribution public-private partnerships. ■

