



Keeping the orphans safe

Almost 80 years ago, the Ramakrishna Ashrama Orphanage came into being. It has offered shelter to hundreds of orphans and other unfortunate children since then. Its chairman, K Ramasamy, shares what it is like to run an orphanage.

Situated along Penang's Jalan Scotland, the Ramakrishna Ashrama has come a long way since it was founded in 1938. This orphanage survived World War II and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya. Since then, it has grown from a small orphanage for Indian orphans to include a primary school and a kindergarten, and today, it is no longer just a shelter for the parentless, but has expanded its role to encompass caring for underprivileged children as well.

Serving as chairman for the orphanage

since 2013 is K Ramasamy, a retired headmaster with almost 35 years of service in education.

"Most of the children in the orphanage are referred to us by the Ministry of Welfare Services of Malaysia. They are either orphans who have lost both parents, or they come from a single parent family with a poor economic background. Some children lost a parent to illness, some still have both parents but the father is serving out a prison sentence or the mother is battling



K Ramasamy.

with a terminal illness. Most are from troubled social backgrounds. It is our duty to remove these children from such environments.

"We strive to protect them from harm and provide them with shelter, food and education, as well as spiritual guidance. To ensure their future, we provide personal accident insurance coverage

to every child. A savings account is also provided for them, in which they keep all the money that they receive, such as *ang paws* and personal monetary gifts from well-wishers and relatives.”

A timetable governs the daily routine of the children at the orphanage. This is to instil discipline and a sense of responsibility in them. The first bell of the day rings at 4.30am. They attend school, prayers and extra classes. They share their bicycles, common toys and board games. They are taught to respect their elders and carry themselves in a respectful manner at all times.

All this was evident when the children greeted me with their heads held high; and their eyes would meet mine. I met Sarah*, 17, and her younger sister, Julie*, 14, during my trip to the orphanage.

“There is nothing to be ashamed about living in an orphanage,” Sarah said as she took me around the dormitory and introduced me to the other children.

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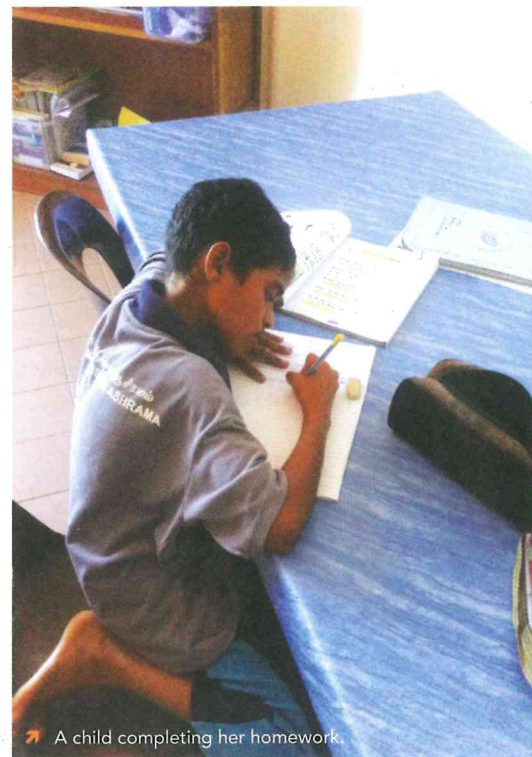
When their mother was too ill after having contracted AIDS, both sisters were sent to the orphanage by their aunt. “Other than my mother, we only have our aunt. But she has her own family and could not afford to take us in.”

Julie, who is currently studying in a nearby secondary school, is also a state archer, and when she’s not studying she is training hard to qualify for Sukma 2016 in Sarawak. Her ambition is to be a national archer.

So, how often do these children get to meet their relatives? “Every Sunday, our relatives will come to the orphanage to meet us from 3pm to 5pm,” said Sarah. “We also get to leave the orphanage and go home for 12 days, usually in December during the long school holidays.

“We are happy here. Of course we miss having our mother, but our other alternatives are to beg on the streets or steal from people just to survive.”

Funding is a key issue in running an



➤ A child completing her homework.

orphanage. Ramakrishna Ashrama gets a partial subsidy from the Ministry of Welfare Services of Malaysia, but the cost of maintaining the orphanage has increased tremendously over the past few years. With almost 55 children in their care, the operational cost amounts to RM40,000 per month. The estimated cost to support a child, which includes education, food, clothing and so on, is RM1,500 per annum. As such, the orphanage has introduced various initiatives, such as the Sponsor a Child and Sponsor a Meal programmes.

Ramasamy himself championed a successful fundraising dinner, raising approximately RM100,000 to overcome the financial crisis back in 2013. The Penang state government supported the fundraising dinner by donating RM10,000 for the event.

Datuk Keramat MP Jagdeep Singh Deo has been instrumental in his support for the orphanage through his various grants. Other than securing a microbus for the orphanage, he has also helped secure an RM4.75mil grant from the federal government to renovate its primary school. Construction work is scheduled



➤ Children playing football.



➤ Common items and toys are shared.