For the love of science

A marine mycologist goes to the ends of the earth in the name of research.

BY WONG ZA
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NOT MANY OF US can list both the north and south poles as places we have visited, but Assoc Prof Dr Sri Aisyah Alias can.

The marine polar researcher and lecturer is one of few women in the field and she is loving every minute of her work.

As deputy director of the National Antarctic Research Centre (NARCS) in the Malaysian Antarctic Research Programme (MARPS) at Universiti Malaya (UM), which is also her alma mater, her work focuses on the biodiversity, biogeochemistry and physiology of marine and polar microflora and fungi.

After graduating from UM with a BSc in Ecology in 1991, she went on to obtain her PhD in marine mycology from Britain’s Portsmouth University in 1996.

She returned to Malaysia to work as a lecturer at UM’s Institute of Biological Sciences and started a research programme on marine mycology, later pursuing postdoctoral work on fungal diversity and enzymology.

Having come from Rembau, Negri Sembilan, Sri Aisyah, 51, received the National Young Scientist Award from the then Science, Technology and Environment Ministry in 2001 before, in 2006, the then Technology and Environment Ministry.

Currently, she is attached to the Institute of Ocean and Earth Science (IOES) at UM. Her interest in the field of science started when she was a kid, having always been a nature lover.

“Growing up, I was an inquisitive child. I love watching scientific documentaries on TV, and admiring the detailed scientific illustrations. I was also obsessed about our earth as a planet. I love the colour blue and I secretly wanted to explore various parts of the world, and shared this with Sri Aisyah in an email interview.

“Many years later, telling people that I wanted to become a scientist when I was ‘big enough’. In retrospect, I didn’t know what sort of a scientist I wanted to be. I had a knack for ecology and biodiversity (even though at that point of time, I didn’t think the term existed yet) in secondary school, but long story short, I ended up majoring in ecology as an undergraduate. It was then that I saw the opportunity for me to pursue a scientific career,” she said.

Currently, her research focuses on the biodiversity of marine fungi associated with invertebrates (such as corals) and its bioactive compound and understanding how fungi from the poles (Antarctic and Arctic) and the tropics respond to the changing climate.

“Global warming, rising sea levels, and acidifying oceans have very real impact on our planet, including these tiny ‘engineers’ of our environment,” explained Sri Aisyah.

“Fungi are wonderfully weird but interesting creatures. Strains of the same species can sometimes grow differently even when they are all given similar treatments such as temperature (changes) and ultraviolet (exposure).”

She has this advice for young people who are thinking of pursuing a career in research.

“In my view, the most important trait to possess when embarking on a Master’s or PhD journey is grit. It definitely helps if you do good research on the programmes you are very interested in.

“Having a stint of an or a never-ending coffee definitely increases your chance of getting into your dream graduate school. More importantly, you are your own personal skill, the ability to endure hardship and independently emotional maturity, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and being supportive and personable to people who are working with you.”

“You also need to surround yourself with supportive people from the start, and especially when the going gets tough,” she advised.

Turning her sadness into joy

Designer channels her grief into creating a unique range of pyjamas.

BY ELIZABETH WELLINGTON

THREE YEARS ago Lauren Raja’s husband, Justin, died unexpectedly while the young couple was on vacation in Greece.

The mourners, I lived in my sad, grey pyjamas and sweats,” Raja said.

These days, Raja has traded in her melancholy jammies for silky slacks complemented with polka dot and stripes, complete with a ruffle sewn across the tush, that she designed herself. The idea came when Raja named the collection of women’s and men’s pyjamas she founded — Lauren Raja Pyjamas, after her husband and grandmother, two women who had inspired her.

“With my son being born it meant so much to me,” said Raja.

And it’s starting to get some buzz.

In a little over a year, Raja has sold a couple of 1,500 pairs of the sleepwear, via her website, justinrraja.com. Raja offers three styles of pyjamas for girls (US$84.40-89.50 / RM367-3920): a one-piece, with feet, and romper style with long pants and capris. There are four designs for women (US$67.96-78.40 / RM273-310): long pants, capris, a nightshirt (Raja says men are buying them for their wives and girlfriends), and a pair of ruffled shorts. Every design features the three-tiered ruffle. Hence the hashtag: pyjamaRaja.

Each pair of PJs comes in a clear zip-up makeup bag with a handmade ribbon.

One of Raja’s fans is Real Housewives of New Jersey’s Teresa Guidice, whom Raja describes as one of her and her daughter’s favorite TV stars.

New York celebrity dermatologist Whitney Bowe wears them when people she knows are having a really tough time. Raja was delighted when she supported the YWCA event and got her former exchange student, Lauren Raja, to talk about her new venture.

Even celebrity blogger Perez Hilton’s two-year-old daughter, Max, wears PJs.

And Justin Jean was the featured celebrity guest for the 2013 Desert & Date 30th annual New Year’s Day Pyjama Brunch, during which she donated 15% of all proceeds from online orders to Alpha Bravo Canine. This is the first time one pyjama brand has worked to close by with the restaurant.

The local love comes just as we enter the winter season, with its misty mornings and cold-weather traditions: gift-giving, brunching. Netfling, baking, lazing around all day, on vacay in our PJs.

When we wear pyjamas, our masks are off,” Raja, 36, said. “It’s a time when you are at your realest, you are almost always surrounded by friends and family. Pyjamas help us make them feel better.

It just so happened that 2017 was another big year for Lauren Raja Pyjamas, according to NPD Group chief industry analyst Marshal Cohen. We distanced ourselves from the celebrity appeal, getting a little shout-out. I don’t know about you, but I’ve seen my fair share of paparazzi in the door — whether it’s in the afternoon, or 2 in the morning — I can’t get into my PJs fast enough.

That sentiment carried into street wear. This year’s trendiest top, whether spotted in thrift stores or in mall specialty shops like J.Crew and Forever 21, was fashioned to look like vintage, striped pyjamas, piping and all. And there are the plain, drawstring PJs rapidly became the hallmark of the Christmas season as families posed in bathed themed themes.

Her collection of pyjamas for women and girls features ruffles and hearts.

The tagline for her PJs: Heavenly comfort, superior style.

“This project really brought me back to life,” said Raja. She designs all of the prints on the fabrics, maintains her own line of orders, manages the social media, and does the packaging.

“Pyjamas for me aren’t about sadness anymore. They are about joy, hope, authenticity, passion and celebration.” — The Philadelphia Inquirer/Tribune News Service