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# ALL PAWS FOR A SUPPORT SYSTEM

A woman is using her talents to create a support system to help protect and enforce the rights of domestic animals under a new law, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

ONE night, an 18-year-old girl arrives home late after a date. Her father is waiting for her. Everything is fine until he sees the love bite on her neck. Suffice to say, he goes a bit "crazy on the boy" and the hapless fellow beats a hasty retreat. The girl assumes that things will soon return to normal. Later in the day, when she returns home from work, her bags have been packed, and left in front of the house.

"That was the single best thing he did," says Seema Subash, the girl in this story, years ago. Refusing to let her father see her fail, she used this tumultuous time in her life to "grow up" and assert her independence.

That streak of determination is evident today as Seema speaks about her current projects in the advent to the enforcement

of the Animal Welfare Act 2015 in June this year. The founder of Pawse for A Cause, the country's biggest animal fundraiser, Seema says that her love for animals has always been there.

In fact, describing herself as a "fat kid" who was subject to bullying, she channelled her pain to rescuing kittens and puppies. In doing so, she learnt something about herself. "The more I worked with animals, the less human behaviour affected me," she confides.

Returning to the subject of this new piece of legislation, there's no mistaking the excitement in her voice when she says: "The law is on our side. We now have a



Seema Subash and her miniature schnauzer, Chelsea.



Mallika Madhavan-Subash and Seema Subash.

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Seema Subash

A Cause. The said video showed a stray dog being rounded up by dog-catchers and the animal was choking and bleeding from its mouth.

Determined to react in a positive manner to this, Seema decided to do something different to celebrate her upcoming birthday on July 3. Organising the first Pawse for A Cause donation drive in 2014, she made a request: instead of gifts, people should donate in cash or kind to promote animal welfare. "At the end of the day, we raised close to RM10,000," reveals Seema, pride shining in her eyes.

In the aftermath of this event, she discovered something else: many lovers of entertainment and arts are also animal lovers. With this knowledge, Pawse for A Cause will be organising an original one-of-a-kind event on July 29 this year. Supported by the Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia, there'll be a concert to showcase local music acts, to raise awareness and support in the fight against animal cruelty. The money raised from this event will be channelled to two causes, one of them being an animal shelter.

#### SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Why not use the money to set up a shelter herself? Ever practical, Seema replies: "Animal lovers are all kinds. I can't sing but I can put an event together. I can't run a shelter. But I can raise money for it."

To find those who are worthy of the money she raises, Seema and her team regularly visit animal shelters all over the country. This year, one of the shelters that Seema hopes to raise money for is called Shikin's Shelter.

Founded in December 2014 by Norashikin Ahmad, it's located in Alor Gajah and is currently home to nearly 100 cats

and 30 dogs. That said, because 23-year-old Shikin (as Norashikin is called) has chosen to keep dogs as well, the challenges have mounted. There are people who have boycotted the nasi lemak stall that her mother runs because of it. Ignoring all of this, Shikin holds true to her father's words that when she's on a rescue mission, it's neither a cat nor a dog but a life.

Whipping out her phone, Seema shows a few photos of Shikin and shares a poignant story. Inside a crib lies Mami, an elderly dog that she rescued with her father. Shikin feeds this dog by hand and loves it unconditionally because it's one of the few tangible links she has to him. Swallowing hard, Seema says: "She inspires people like us."

In the end, Seema's message is clear. Even if we have laws and regulations in place that protect animal welfare, we still need to support each other in properly enforcing them. Bringing our chat to a close, she says: "An idea is only an idea until it gets a breath of life from a support system."



Norashikin Ahmad caring for Mami.



Mami, Norashikin's dog, rests on her own bed, with another furry friend for company.

PICTURES BY OSMAN ADNAN

recognised statute that protects domestic pets and shelters."

#### MARGINALISED

For a long time, explains the 40-year-old divorcee, domestic animals (and dogs in particular) have been marginalised. An owner of nine dogs and four cats, Seema shakes her head when she says: "Dogs are not given the respect and dignity they deserve. They can't protect themselves the way cats can. A dog's immediate instinct is to love and they cannot see cruelty coming their way."

Such cruelty, says Seema, can come in many forms. A perfect one is when a dog cannot accompany its owner to an eatery. As if on cue, the manager of the establishment we're in comes up to us and makes a specific request that we stay outside as council rules do not permit Chelsea (Seema's miniature schnauzer) to enter the premises.

"This is what I mean," says Seema, vexed. The reason often given by the authorities is that it's all a matter of hygiene. Frowning, Seema asks bluntly: "Have you seen the hygiene of the toilets in a restaurant or pub on a Saturday night? People are OK with that, but not a dog sitting at a bar?"

What Seema would like is for people to use their common sense rather than paranoia to form their opinion about something new. This, and keeping an open

mind, are lessons she learnt when she was 19 years old and offered a job on the Marlboro racing team. "Can you imagine?" she asks, giving a quick laugh. "I went home one day and told my parents, 'You know what? I'm leaving for Japan in a week.'"

While her father was cautious, Seema's mother, Mallika, encouraged the eldest of her five children to go on this adventure. In the next year, young Seema travelled to many cities around the world and now speaks fluent Italian. Perhaps one of the enduring lessons she learnt was in Monte Carlo when she came across something she'd never seen before — women sunbathing topless. "I was like, 'Oh wow. People are doing it,'" she adds with a giggle.

She also learnt that if she keeps her energy positive, no matter how bad people say the world is, she'd be fine.

#### FAKE NEWS

That said, there are times when such resolve is tested. A few years ago, Seema had uploaded a video onto YouTube about Chelsea. In no time, at all, she was shamed for allegedly abusing the dog. In actual fact, the video was of Chelsea dancing to Psy's K-Pop single, *Gangnam Style*. With a cheeky smile, Seema adds: "It was fake news."

As it happens, there was one YouTube video depicting a true story uploaded by netizens sometime in 2013 that became the impetus for Seema to start Pawse For



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