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Tsunami Survivor Rizal Shahputra Doing Fine In Malaysia

By Stephen Ng

Hardly two years have passed, and with memories of the tsunami that obliterated his hometown of Calang, southwest of Aceh, still fresh on his mind, Rizal Shahputra is saddened by yet another tsunami that hit the Java coast of Indonesia, leaving hundreds of people dead and scores of others still reported missing.

Speaking in English, the 21-year-old Rizal empathised with the families of the victims. "Why does it have to happen again to my countrymen?" he asked, fretting over the latest tsunami that hit the town of Pangandaran on Monday.

"I know of only one friend, Jony from Jakarta, whom I met when he visited Aceh a few years ago. I managed to call him last night. It was a relief to know that he and his family are safe. For the rest of the victims, I pray for them and their families."

Rizal made international headlines when he was found afloat in the sea, clinging steadfastly onto a log for nine days and eight nights before he was miraculously rescued by a passing cargo ship from the Straits of Malacca in January 2005.

After his recovery, Rizal was officially "adopted" on humanitarian grounds to study English language at University College Sedaya International (UCSI) here.

His progress to Level 3 in the Certificate in English programme has been described as "promising" by lecturers and senior administrators of the private university.

At UCSI, where he attends English lessons with classmates of some 10 different nationalities, Rizal is doing fine. In his spare time, he works as a gymnasium trainer for a small allowance.

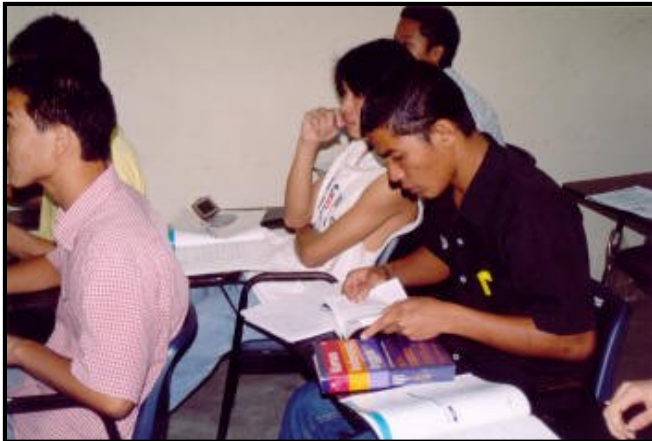


Rizal's first day at UCSI

Described as an active participant and an avid learner by his favourite English language teacher, Carrie Baber, Rizal's progress has been encouraging.

"He is adjusting fine. As a simple village boy, with little or almost no exposure to the outside world, Rizal is getting a lot of good exposure from his friends all over the world," said Baber.

"He has also expressed a lot more independence in his learning besides having a lot of convictions and would not hesitate to offer his opinions. We have enjoyed his good sense of humour."



Rizal in class

There was once when the eloquent young Rizal disbelievingly asked his fellow student from China in simple English, "You mean you eat dog meat and snakes?" The whole class laughed.

Another English teacher, Yeoh Pei Lee who had taught him English, offered her evaluation of Rizal's performance: "Rizal is a fast learner. For things that he does not understand, he is not shy to ask questions. Sometimes, he even volunteers information, which shows that he has a lot of initiative in learning the English language."

Although being a village boy who hardly travelled beyond his own village of Calang, Rizal has overcome his culture shocks. Today, he is mingling well with people from different nationalities - from as far as China, Hong Kong and Japan to countries in the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East - who, like him, are learning English before gaining entry into the university's various degree programmes.

For Rizal, the nightmares of the Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami which killed his parents, brothers and sisters will hopefully be erased.

UCSI's Vice President for Research and Corporate Affairs, Prof. Dr. Norfadzillah Hitam, who had led a team of UCSI staff to help in tsunami-stricken Aceh, is hopeful that Rizal will be able to continue into the degree programme till completion. "He is smart and very alert, and has an inquisitive mind," she said.

"We can understand the trauma that he had gone through, watching his whole family die in the tsunami killer waves when the disaster hit Aceh last year. We wanted to do something to help, and without any hesitation, the management decided to give Rizal a scholarship to study English for a year. I have every confidence he will complete this Certificate programme successfully soon and continue into a degree programme of his choice next semester", she said.

The scholarship includes free accommodation as well as part-time employment on-campus to enable him to earn some income for his personal expenses.

Dr. Norfadzillah said: "This is part of our social responsibility. Whatever we can do, we will do to help. We cannot help everyone in Aceh, but even if we can help one person like Rizal to have a fresh start in life after the tsunami, we are more than happy."

The Indonesian Deputy Chief of Mission to Malaysia, A.M. Fachir, who visited the UCSI campus in Cheras, said that he was very grateful with UCSI's generosity in particular, and of the people of Malaysia in general.

"Given this opportunity to acquire a good education, we hope that Rizal will not disappoint us, and that he will continue to study hard and prove himself to be a good student," he said.

"Rizal is a very fortunate one-in-a-million Acehnese who has been given this opportunity to pursue his higher education in Malaysia and we wish him every success," Fachir added.

Rizal wants to fulfil his late father's wishes -- just one day before the tsunami hit his village, his father advised him to become a useful citizen. His plan is to pursue a degree in English and Communications.

"After that, I want to be like Carrie Baber and become an English teacher either in Medan or Aceh," he said, enthusiastically.

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