

As a teenager, Ms Aliyah Fathin Sirajul Islam juggled school with caring for her three younger siblings. While it was a huge responsibility for a 16-year-old, it taught her the importance of being close to her loved ones and the need to persevere through tough times, she tells **The Straits Times** in this series about millennials who inspire us with their courage and resilience.

GenerationGrit

She juggled O levels with caring for her 3 siblings

Tan Tam Mei

Two weeks before her O levels, Ms Aliyah Fathin Sirajul Islam's care-free teenage life was overturned when a gas explosion at her parents' restaurant left it in ruins and her family heavily in debt.

The incident in 2011 also injured 11 people, and her parents were hit with a \$63,000 fine for fire safety violations.

In the months that followed, Mr Sirajul Islam, 53, and Madam Sapiyah Haron, 49, were suddenly thrown into a whirlwind of legal tussles and mounting debt.

Said Ms Aliyah, now 23: "Everything was taken away from them at that point. Suddenly, they had no time to handle the household matters and take care of my siblings."

She was 16, and due to take her O levels in two weeks when the responsibility of caring for her three siblings, then aged two, three and six, was thrust upon her.

"My parents were busy in court and visiting the injured in hospital."

"I knew that if I didn't help them, nobody would," said Ms Aliyah, who currently helps out at her parents' takeaway food stall in Boon Lay.

In the days leading up to the O-levels, classmates and teachers at Ju-

ong West Secondary School often saw her with at least two of her siblings in tow during study sessions in the evening.

In between preparing for the exams, Ms Aliyah also had to feed her siblings, change the diapers of the two-year-old and tackle the household chores.

Still, she did well enough to make it to Innova Junior College.

After putting her siblings to bed, Ms Aliyah would start on her schoolwork at around 9pm and study late into the night.

Her life became filled with the worry and stress of meeting her siblings' daily needs, helping them with their schoolwork and even attending their parent-teacher meetings.

The teenager had little time for herself or her friends.

After her school activities, she would be busy ferrying her siblings to and from their school and child-care centre in Jurong.

"It was overwhelming. I felt like a teen mum," said Ms Aliyah.

When she took her siblings out for the weekend, people would ask if they were her children.

"That was a common question. I felt like I had to give up my teenage life and be more mature for them."

After the 2011 incident, Ms Aliyah's parents spent most of their



Ms Aliyah Fathin Sirajul Islam (centre) was a mother figure to (from left) her brother, Alman Safwan, 10, and sisters, Aliyah Tsara, nine, and Aliyah Maisarah, 13, while her parents, Mr Sirajul Islam and Madam Sapiyah Haron, were busy rebuilding their business after an explosion at their restaurant left the family in debt. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

time trying to rebuild the restaurant and exploring other business opportunities to earn money.

Madam Sapiyah said: "Back then, things were bad, and my husband and I couldn't focus on the children."

"For months, I couldn't sleep or eat, and I even forgot that Aliyah was taking her O levels then."

Madam Sapiyah said she has apologised to her daughter several times for her sacrifice.

"But she always said, 'It's okay Mama. I'm part of this family too.' I'm very fortunate to have such a good daughter," said Madam Sapiyah.

The need to be around for her siblings meant she had to give up on her childhood dream of becoming a doctor.

While she did not do well enough to study medicine in a local university, she secured a place in a medical school in China where English is

GENERATION GRIT

Know of a Singaporean aged 35 or below who has shown grit amid life's adversities? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

the medium of instruction.

However, she gave it up after realising that she would have to be away from her family for nine years and that it would add to the family's financial burden.

"I would rather hold my family together than go off and pursue my own dream," said Ms Aliyah, who opted to study nursing at Ngee Ann Polytechnic instead.

"My siblings needed someone around and I was worried they wouldn't get the proper guidance and support if I was away."

As a young adult, Ms Aliyah also struggled with the different roles she was expected to fulfil. "I played so many roles – mother, daughter, student, sister. It was stressful."

Alone at night, she would cry quietly, careful not to wake her siblings with whom she shared a mattress in the living room of their four-room flat in Jurong West.

In the past, her parents would leave the flat at around 8am and return home after midnight.

"We never sat down as a family. Even during the Ramadan period, my siblings and I would have to break fast on our own."

"We never did it as a family until quite recently," said Ms Aliyah, who graduated in May.

She will be pursuing a degree in nursing at the Singapore Institute of Technology next month.

Business at her parents' food stall

has improved. However, they are still grappling with the \$90,000 owed to relatives who helped them.

The couple now make it a point to set aside Sundays for their children.

Madam Sapiyah said it is time for her daughter to focus on building her own family.

Ms Aliyah got married last year but still lives with her family.

Her husband is based in Bangladesh.

For her, the experience taught her the importance of family and persevering together.

"You have to hold onto your family members, bring them together."

"Family is where everyone comes together, has their meals together, goes through difficulties together, laughs together."

"That is family."

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