

The paper's people

For the love of science

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

By WONG LI ZA
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NOT many of us can list both the north and south poles as places we have visited before, but Assoc Prof Dr Siti 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 (NARC) in the Malaysian Antarctic Research Programme (MARP) at Universiti Malaya (UM), which is also her alma mater, her work focuses on the biodiversity, biochemistry and physiology of marine and polar microbes 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 polar research on fungal diversity and enzymology.

Hailing from Rembau, Negri Sembilan, Siti Aisyah, 51, received the National Young Scientist Award from the then Science, Technology and Environment Ministry in 2001.

Currently, she is attached to the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences (IOES) in 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 loved watching scientific documentaries on TV, and admired the level of detail in 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 globe," shared Siti Aisyah in an e-mail interview.

"I remember 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 don't think the terms existed yet!) in secondary school, but long story short, I ended up majoring in ecology as an undergrad. 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 Siti 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 opinion, 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 string of As or a near-perfect CGPA definitely increases your chance of getting into your dream graduate school but what puts you above the rest are your personal skills, the ability to work and think 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.



'Fungi are wonderfully weird but interesting creatures,' enthuses Assoc Prof Dr Siti Aisyah Alias, a researcher at the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, Universiti Malaya. — AZMAN GHANI / The Star

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.

"For months, I lived in my sad, grey pyjamas and sweats," Raja said.

These days, Raja has traded in her melancholy jammies for silky sleepwear splashed with polka dots and stripes, complete with a ruffle sewn across the tush, that she designs in her apartment. She named the collection of women's and young girls' night-night fashion line Justin Jean Pyjamas, after her husband and grandmother, two people she loved very much.

"It's my way of remembering people who meant so much to me," said Raja.

And it's starting to get some buzz.

In a little over a year, Raja has sold more than 1,600 pairs of the sleepwear, via her website, justin-jeanpjs.com. Raja offers three styles of jammies for girls (US\$41-\$49.50 / RM167-RM200): a onesie (with feet), and two-piece styles with long pants and capris. There are four designs for women (US\$67-\$76 / RM273-RM310): 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: rocktheruffles.

Each pair of PJs comes in a clear zip-up makeup bag with a hand-made scrunchie.

One of Raja's fans is *Real Housewives Of New Jersey's* Teresa Giudice. She's touted Justin Jean as one of her and her daughter's favourite cosy sleepy-time options.

New York celebrity dermatologist Whitney Bowe wears them while relaxing in bed, and ABC reporter/anchor Erin O'Hearn and her daughter have matching pairs. Even celebrity blogger Perez Hilton's two-year-old daughter, Mia, rocks the ruffle.

And Justin Jean was the featured sleepwear at the White Dog Cafe's 30th annual New Year's Day Pajama 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 so closely with the restaurant.

The local love comes just as we enter the winter season, with its mix of modern and old-school traditions: gift-givin', brunchin', Netflixin', and, well, lounging 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 you realest, you are laid back, and you are almost always surrounded by friends and family. Pyjamas help us make these memories."

It just so happened that 2017 was the year of pyjamas, according to NPD Group chief industry analyst Marshal Cohen. We donned sleepwear for way more than getting a little shut-eye. I don't know about you, but the moment I walk in the door – whether it's 2 in the afternoon, or 2 in the morning – I



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

can't get into my PJs fast enough.

That sentiment carried into street wear. This year's trendiest tops, whether spotted in thrift stores or in mall specialty shops like J.Crew and Forever 21, were fashioned to look like vintage, striped pyjamas, piping and all.

And then there are the plaid, drawstring PJs rapidly became the hallmark of the Christmas season as families posed in baggy flannel two-pieces.

In 2013, a year before her husband died, Raja asked Justin for a sewing machine. At the time, she was thinking about the grandmother who'd raised her, "Mama" Jean Faló, a South Philly-bred homemaker and avid seamstress who died earlier that year at 80.

Raja's husband, vice president at a bank, bought her the machine. But Raja, who was working as a middle school math teacher, couldn't find the time to sew.

The following October, the couple went to Greece for a wedding and decided to take a day trip on a catamaran. Raja was upstairs on the boat. Justin took a dive into the water. When Raja came downstairs, she says she saw a friend dragging her husband out of the water and giving him CPR. Justin never woke up.

Raja came back home and buried her husband on her birthday. She felt lost. She quit teaching. She spent her days in her apartment in total darkness, mourning.

One day, she saw the sewing machine in the corner and thought

to herself, "What would Mama Jean do?"

Slowly, she started sketching. She'd never taken a sewing class, but she started making "wacky" things: a shower cap with detachable fleece lining; a leather flower that she planned to sell on Etsy, but that cost way too much to replicate. She made a summer dress. But the world didn't need any more dress designers, did it?

Then she had a thought: Justin loved polka dots, especially on fancy socks. And when Raja thought about Mama Jean, her mind's eye took her to the ruffled knickers of her childhood. How could those items work together? Pyjamas, perhaps?

Raja designed a sample. The first pair were multi-coloured dots in the same colours you might find on a Twister board. Three rows of ruffles stretching across the hiney. On the left sleeve she added a heart, because, Raja says, "True healing comes from wearing your heart on your sleeve." And at the centre of the heart is a handwritten logo.

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 the website, fulfills 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