

Dad's the last word

Relatively Speaking
 Eve Yap

Political science undergraduate Syed Arafat Hussain has debated in about 20 regional and world debating competitions. But there is one person he cannot out-argue: his retired police officer father Syed Muravvat Hussain, once a senior staff sergeant.

Not even in Secondary 3 at Swiss Cottage Secondary School, when he was wrongfully accused of being a chatterbox and disrupting the class, could he convince his father of his innocence.

Everyone had goofed around during an accounting class and a friend poked fun at the teacher. Arafat, 25, was unfortunately singled out by his form teacher "as I was generally talkative", says the final-year student at the Singapore Management University.

Mr Muravvat, 54, recalls: "When I got to the school, Arafat tried to explain that it wasn't his fault. I said, 'Keep quiet. I don't want to hear you.'

"Simply siding with the child will not do him any favours. Instead, I may make him worse."

Arafat's mother, Madam Zaiton Ali, also 54, says: "When his father got home, he was boiling mad. He glued all the discs together."

Arafat was livid - he and his older brother had bought the games with their savings.

Still, he learnt an important life lesson. "Sometimes when you have been wrongfully accused, you just have to accept the punishment because there's some value to it. Channel the injustice to motivate yourself and be a better person."

Wise and apt words from someone whose passion in educating youth on issues of the day won him the Dymon Asia Scholarship for Social Impact.

Arafat, who works as a part-time debate coach at secondary schools and junior colleges, volunteers at the Chong Pang Community Club's mock youth parliament scheme. He grooms youth in oratory skills, spending more than 30 hours a month on the work since December.

Home is a five-room HDB flat in Jurong West, which he shares with his parents. His older brother Syed Muzaffar Hussain, 29, a senior industrial relations officer, is married and lives with his own family.



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"You just have to accept the punishment because there's some value to it. Channel the injustice to motivate yourself and be a better person."

MR SYED ARAFAT HUSSAIN (left) on the lesson he learnt after he was wrongfully accused of being a chatterbox in class. With him are (from far left) his elder brother Syed Muzaffar Hussain, niece Sara Huiying Syed Muzaffar, sister-in-law Sabrina Ng M., as well as parents Zaiton Ali and Syed Muravvat Hussain

Arafat, how did community work become an important part of your life?

Arafat: When I was at Tanglin Primary School, many kids came from dysfunctional homes. Some Primary 5 pupils were already smoking and drinking or talking about pornography.

Madam Zaiton: In Primary 2 or 3, he wanted to help a buddy in reading during their 20-minute recess time. He said he'd eat in five minutes and spend the other 15 minutes helping the boy.

What ambitions did your parents have for you when you were younger?

Arafat: My parents never once told me to be someone, except not to be trash.

Mr Muravvat: I had no ambitions for him. I knew that as he matured, he would know what path to take.

Madam Zaiton: When he was eight, he wanted to be a teacher. But at 19, when he was a relief teacher, he changed his mind, saying teaching was stressful.

Arafat: I feel I can do more in the areas of policies and governance.

What was your parenting style for Arafat and his elder brother?

Arafat: They had huge carrots and sticks.

Mr Muravvat: If they didn't behave, I caned. If they behaved or did well in school, we had outings such as going to Johor Baru for food. I gave Arafat and his brother \$1,000 each for doing well at the Primary School Leaving Examinations and O levels.

Arafat: By the time I got to secondary school, it was mostly just sticks.

Mr Muravvat: I lectured them for 1½ hours, sometimes till they yawned. They dared not ask to be excused or I'd extend the nagging.

Arafat: My dad told us his obligation was to school us up to only O levels. My brother and I paid for our polytechnic and university fees, though I did get \$160 monthly in polytechnic - for all meals out.

Mr Muravvat: They have to learn to struggle on their own, so they can be self-reliant.

Mr Muravvat, were you extra fierce because you were a policeman?

Mr Muravvat: You can't discipline by talking alone. The moulding must start before they hit 14 or 15. Once their mind is corrupted, it's hard to make a turnaround.

Madam Zaiton: We had friends whose children were juvenile delinquents by the time they were teenagers.

Mr Muravvat: I was also a young parent. My first son came when I was 24. I did not have a lot of patience. Sometimes I cried in my heart after disciplining them. I caned them when they were naughty. One good stroke was enough. I know they resented me sometimes but they have turned out all right.

Arafat: Fair enough. But at the end of the day, there's no resentment.

Muzaffar: The form of punishment wasn't ideal for us kids but for their generation, it was the norm.

Arafat: I learnt from observing my brother how to avoid doing stupid things like not doing homework.

If the parent-child roles were reversed, what would you do differently?

Mr Muravvat: I would behave myself.

Madam Zaiton: Since my father is fierce and beats the children if they are in the wrong, I would try not to do things that make him angry.

Arafat: I would not throw away the cane but I would be more patient, rationalise first and use the cane as the last resort. I'd also make sure the punishment was commensurate with the crime.

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