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Dr Adeeba's many hats

Dr Adeeba with her husband Muhamad Umar and sons Luqman (right) and Karim.



IF&THEN with Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman

SHE helms a faculty with 568 staff members and is a key international figure in the world of HIV/AIDS. Anyone who has met Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman knows better than to mess with her.

But cream crackers slathered with condensed milk and Milo sprinkled on top is what makes her list of guilty pleasures.

"You just spread a layer of the milk and put the Milo powder on top," said Dr Adeeba, whose name is synonymous with HIV/AIDS advocacy both locally and internationally.

She wears many hats, with many feathers of accomplishment — the



Dr Adeeba says the honorary doctorate is the highest recognition.

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most recent was being conferred an honorary doctorate of laws by her alma mater, Monash University. Among the notable figures to have been given the honour include Nobel laureate Aung Sang Suu Kyi and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"This came out of the blue. They don't just give it to anyone," she said.

"It is the highest form of recognition."

Dr Adeeba was conferred the honorary doctorate by the university's deputy chancellor Yehudi Blacher in recognition of her outstanding contributions in research on infectious diseases and as a health advocate.

She said while her family expected her to pursue more lucrative areas of specialty post medical school, it was infectious diseases that she finally settled on.

"Infectious diseases interested me most because firstly, the field is so broad with many areas for subspecialisation and it combines clinical medicine, as well as public health and socio-political issues like no other field in medicine can," she said referring to her days at Monash Medical Centre and Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital.

Dr Adeeba joined UM in 1996 as a lecturer at the Department of Medicine and entered the ranks of professorship in 2001.

One of her key achievements when she was Malaysian AIDS Council president was pushing for the implementation of harm reduction in 2006. This move by the government saw infections halved among injecting

drug users.

Internationally, she chairs the World Health Organisation's strategic and technical advisory committee on HIV/AIDS and is a governing council member of the International AIDS Society and the UNAIDS Scientific Expert Panel.

Last year, she was also named one of the 20 most influential Muslim female scientists in the world and was guest editor for *The Lancet* series on HIV and injecting drug use.

In her graduation address, Dr Adeeba said her training at Monash and Fairfield taught her what being a good doctor meant.

"Day in, day out, I met and attended to young people dying from a disease feared by many. It was at Fairfield Hospital in the early 90s that I saw and learnt the meaning of true love, compassion, courage, strength, passion and dedication," she said.

"I saw true love in a mother whose son was dying from AIDS who never left his bedside. I saw true compassion in Imam Fehmi from the nearby Preston Mosque who would bring dinner every single day to a dying Fatimah, a transgender person from Brunei — shunned by the entire Malay Muslim community in Melbourne."

She said her husband Datuk Muhamad Umar Swift used to remind her that it would only take another three years to train and specialise in the more lucrative fields of cardiology or gastroenterology that would allow him to retire earlier.

"My mother was not too happy. She said, 'what kind of a specialty is that, dealing with drug users and people with AIDS?' But ultimately as Dr Seuss said, 'you know what you know and YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go. No regrets.'"

Dr Adeeba also doled out some advice for the graduates when she told them to push themselves beyond what was expected.

"There is much wrong in this world that needs to be righted — poverty, inequality, access to healthcare, violence against women and children to name just a few," she said.

"Those kinds of commitment need not consume your life but they will enrich it if you make a conscientious effort to dedicate some of your time to helping your fellow men and women who are not as fortunate."

IF there were three words to describe me...
THEN they would be resilient, optimistic and transformative.

IF I had one place where I could have a holiday...
THEN it would be my home. I would read and play Scrabble.

IF I could be a superhero...
THEN I would be Wonder Woman. She has pouffy hair and a tiara.

IF I could have my favourite food everyday...
THEN it would be pisang goreng. What did you think I'd say? Foie gras?

IF I could meet one of my idols...
THEN it would be Saidatina Siti Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's wife — a successful woman of impeccable personality and virtue.

IF I had three wishes...
THEN they would be to be taller and slimmer, that we could return to the Malaysia of yesteryear when it comes to race relations and that my two boys will forever be healthy, happy and successful.

IF I had a million ringgit...
THEN I would fix my house. It was built in the 1960s. There are three bathrooms in the house but we can only use one.

IF I did not have to work...
THEN I would spend my time learning more about Islamic civilisation and culture especially the glory days of Islamic science and medicine.