



No plan B

PHOTOGRAPHY MULOY LUIB PRODUCTION & MAKEUP NURHAMIZA HAJI ROSLAN LOCATION NEOCLASSIC MUSIC SCHOOL

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There is no plan B for Veenea Kamalam Pascual Nair. Even at a young age of 18, a time when most of her peers can't even decide what degree to pursue in university, the senior grand finalist of the World Championship of Performing Arts (WCOA) is bent on having an international recording career.

"Even if you have a plan B, it might suck anyway. So you might as well stick with your plan A," she says, paraphrasing one of the music producers she met at the WCOA event.

For Veenea, there's no other path but the one that has been carved for her since she was born.

She belongs to a musically-inclined family. Her mother Lennie used to join singing competitions in the Philippines while her dad Shanan is a corporate executive who relaxes at home by listening to all types of music, fostering Veenea's love for music. She likes Alicia Keys, Celine Dion and Adele. But like any old soul at heart, Veenea also cites Aretha Franklin and Etta James as big musical influences.

Music has always been a source of both joy and comfort for Veenea. She says her mother used to lull her to sleep at night. When she was diagnosed with an acute form of leukemia at the age of four, it was music that eased the pain of chemotherapy treatments.

"I was really tired and (the treatments were) so painful. My mom would say 'let's sing a few songs'. We'd be singing and then I'd feel a lot better," she says.

When she turned five, Veenea was sent to music school for voice and piano lessons. That same year, clad in a pink dress, she joined the music school's recital and sang "Colors of the Wind". From then on, Veenea would continue her musical training. This won't only hone her talent but also instilled discipline. She learned to manage her time as she had to squeeze her recitals and music lessons in between her academic studies in St Andrew's School and International School. She also controlled her diet. To this day, Veenea doesn't drink cold beverages and seldom eats dairy products, sweet or spicy food as she wants to preserve the quality of her voice.

"When I was growing up, my mom would let me have some sweets and candies. But not before recitals. I got more disciplined because I really wanted to sing," she says.

Veenea was 12 years old when she got her first paid gig singing at the National Achievers Congress held in Kuala Lumpur. The event featured several motivational speakers including Veenea who not only sang but talked about her experience as a cancer survivor. This first gig led to other singing engagements at various corporate events in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore. A portion of her talent fee goes to building Veenea's Foundation to help and counsel children with cancer and their parents.

That kind of passion, discipline and focus would serve her well years later when in 2015, upon the suggestion of her long time vocal coach Sharon Jusay, she decided to join WCOA, which is known as the Olympics for the performing arts. Veenea knew that she wanted to win. And just like anyone going for

the gold, she had the support of her family and coach to move her closer to her goal.

"I believe you really need to prepare yourself and have people who support you all the way. It takes a team to make a dream work," she says.

Veenea spent the next eight months developing her voice, building her stamina and preparing herself mentally and emotionally for what will eventually become her biggest career break.

She would wake up every day at 5.30am so she could do her daily vocalisation, practise her songs with the help of her vocal coach and go to the gym for her daily swim. She would read inspirational and self-help books, and watch YouTube videos of how the likes of Celine Dion and Alicia Keys prepare for their major performances. She and her family would pray together every day to have the faith and spiritual strength to win.

All these efforts paid off big time. In July 2016, Veenea's performance won her not only an industry award, three gold medals, one silver medal, four bronze medals and two plaques, but also a scholarship from Indasoul Entertainment. The Los Angeles-based production firm, founded by rap artist Marc "M-Doc" Williams, has given her a chance to write and produce her own songs.

Which is what she's currently doing.

Veenea, who just finished her Canadian pre-university programme at Taylor's College in Kuala Lumpur, is spending her gap year composing songs for her future album.

"I want to create more songs that will inspire any person who listens and create such energy to boost their day."

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PHOTOGRAPHY MULOY LUIB PRODUCTION FAARON WONG

Aaron Wong
BELAIT

RETURNING to his office in Lumut just a week after his first son was born, Azim Azamain saw a letter on his desk. Perhaps a reward, a new mission, or even a promotion. After all, the 25-year-old had risen through the ranks to become a permit holder for a multinational construction company, a well paying but demanding job that saw him leave for work before sunrise and return after dark.

Instead, Azim found himself being terminated. His eyes glazing intently over the letter, he learned that his company would be leaving in the oil and gas downturn.

His mind frantically sought for alternatives. But there was little time to ruminate. His son Muhammad Aqeel Asyura, born prematurely, needed major surgery.

"There are moments in life that will make you or break you," he says. "In these great trials, I now believe, we are being tested by the Almighty."

As he served his one-month notice in November last year, Azim applied for six jobs, but not one called for an interview. "So I thought to myself. Fine. If I can't find a job, then I will create one," he says.

Amongst a small group of automobile enthusiasts, Azim had earned a reputation as a detailer who would apply surgical precision towards the cleaning and polishing of cars, restoring them to a showroom quality finish.

"I picked up auto detailing from a friend back in 2008," he says. "I've always loved cars, so restoring, giving it that next level of care, appealed to me. Whenever I would return from offshore, it was my form of release."

The art of auto detailing has its roots in the

United States, where it is a multi-billion dollar industry that continues to grow despite the economic downturn. However, the practice largely escapes all but the most die-hard motor enthusiasts in the sultanate, with only a handful of car wash businesses, found primarily in the capital, branding themselves as detailers.

"There was certainly a gap in the Belait market in offering premium car washes, detailing and restoration," he says. "But there were so many questions that couldn't be answered. Would people (in this economy) pay for a car wash three times a regular wash? Would people pay hundreds for restoration, correction and polishing?"

While Azim, now 26, wrestled with these questions, he also knew the answers wouldn't come while he sat twirling a pen. In December 2015, Azim took a leap of faith and opened Ultra Slick Detailer in his home garage in Kg Pandan C.

Judging from the amount of ridicule that immediately followed, it was clear that the onus would fall squarely on the 26-year-old's shoulders to prove his case.

"There were more than a few who doubted the price and what I could do," he says. "But I had no qualms. It was my job to prove them wrong. I said: 'If you aren't happy with the result, don't pay.'"

Once you've skimmed the details of his life's story you'll be forced to think twice before counting him out. Azim dropped out school at just 13, failing to even complete the lower secondary assessment (PMB). Two years passed spent in the wrong crowd where Azim admits, he "did nothing useful". He resolved to change and began stocking shelves at Soon Lee supermarket for \$300 a month. Inch by inch for the better part of a decade, Azim slowly climbed the ladders of different

local companies from the very bottom. His willingness to humble himself to learn proved to be his greatest asset, allowing him to progress in an oil and gas industry littered with degree graduates. At 24, Azim was picked up by a multinational company where he earned close to \$4,000 a month. But it appears life had something else in store for him.

Ten months into Ultra Slick's opening, small groups are seen at the car wash as Azim and his team bring out an array of speciality gloves, brushes and towels, cleaning chemicals costing north of \$50 for a litre and a spotlight, ready to get down to business.

One afternoon, a car owner brings along his friends to watch the entirety of the hour-long premium wash, easily three times the length of an average wash seen elsewhere. They pick up a tip or two in the process and leave delighted with the result.

Today, Ultra Slick grosses \$10,000 a month, a five-fold increase from its first month. The response has drawn the eye of an investor, who will partner with Azim to open a warehouse style facility by the middle of next year. His son, while still needing special attention, had a successful surgery in July.

As he tells his team of four at Ultra Slick Detailer, all locals in their 20s who are struggling to find jobs in the downturn, when faced with life's challenges, assume responsibility and go into action.

"As a person, you can sit there and wallow in your pity, become a victim of circumstance. Or you can decide that while you may have been beaten, you have not been broken," he says.

"You will come back better and stronger than before. And believe wholeheartedly — if there is no way, then I will make a way."

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