

A WORTHY CAUSE

For the love of music and dance

RoundBox is a safe haven where youths can develop their passion and interests

SINGAPORE – At the age of 15, Muhd Afi Hidayat felt aimless and unsure of what he wanted to do with his life. All he knew was that he enjoyed hip hop dance, so he and his schoolmates set up a dance club as a co-curricular activity. It was also then that he learnt about RoundBox, a drop-in centre under the Singapore Children's Society. Together with fellow enthusiasts, he visited the youth drop-in centre in order to use the free dance studio and also started attending weekly dance classes there.

Now 20 years old, Afi said that RoundBox was where he honed his skills and to this day, dance remains a passion that he continues to pursue.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LIFE

At RoundBox, youths aged nine to 19 are welcome to use the facilities and participate in performing arts programmes like dance or music classes for free upon registration. It's a safe environment to hang out in and the youths are encouraged to talk to any of the counsellors or staff when they have anything on their minds. Afi said: "It's not just a centre, it's like a second home."

Afi's mother died when he was still in kindergarten, and his father remarried when he was in primary one. While he gradually grew close to his stepmother, he recalled that with three siblings back then, his parents could not afford to give him the attention he needed.

"My parents weren't very controlling. They gave me a certain degree of freedom as long as I wasn't doing anything bad," said Afi. "I was lucky to have come here instead of wasting my time. I developed my skills as a dancer, learnt to think for myself and became more responsible."

At RoundBox, life skills were also imparted. The centre actively sought out performance opportunities for the youths, which helped to boost their



From left: Muhd Afi Hidayat and Mohamed Razlee. PHOTOS: KOH MUI FONG

confidence. Afi also recalled how the dance instructor would offer advice on how to turn their interest into a career, and how the staff would talk to them about what they could do after they graduated from school.

These days, Afi still visits RoundBox regularly, not just to use the dance studio but also to teach dance to younger children. Armed with a diploma in psychology that he attained in February, he is thinking about how he can eventually work at RoundBox and follow in the footsteps of Amanda Zee, his role model and a social worker at the centre when he first started visiting. She is now a senior social worker and working at Youth Centre (Jurong).

He said: "RoundBox is a good place. Young people can learn a lot here, and the older kids can also teach the younger kids. It's a cycle."

FUELLING THE PASSION

For 26-year-old Mohamed Razlee, returning to RoundBox after all these years was a sort of homecoming to the place that solidified his commitment to music. At the age of 14, he had visited the centre with four friends to use the free jamming studio. There, he met Roy Martin, the instructor responsible for instilling in him a lifetime love of music.

Now working as a casino security officer, Razlee recalled how he and his friends didn't appreciate Roy at first, because "he was into blues rock while we were playing alternative and punk rock". To them, Roy was a tough, old school teacher.

Slowly, they realised that his methods were exactly what were needed to whip them into shape as real rockers. He recalled: "We learnt a lot from him. In fact, it was embarrassing to think back to how we were playing before our lessons with him."

It wasn't all about learning new instruments and playing guitar chords correctly though. During the time spent with Roy at RoundBox, he also gained the courage and confidence needed to perform

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“Music is hard to learn, but if you love it, it makes it easier. I want to be like Roy. Just don't give up on the kids.”

Mohamed Razlee, on his music mentor

on stage and even to compete against 200 bands in a national competition.

His band came in sixth — exactly as Roy predicted. "He told us we'd make it into the semi-finals and finals, and even that we'd come in fifth or sixth," said Razlee. "He was spot on because he was that knowledgeable and experienced."

Razlee stopped visiting RoundBox when he enlisted for national service. One big reason for his return mid-last year was to see Roy again. He said: "I never stopped playing in a band and my love for music never waned. I still want to learn more about music from Roy."

To his disappointment, Roy was no longer teaching at RoundBox. Nonetheless, Razlee decided to stay on to help train the newer bands on his days off. In his free time, he continues to play with his band and has a performance coming up in May.

"I told my wife that my guitar is my second wife," he admitted with a laugh. "If given the chance, I still want to pursue a career in music. It'd be wonderful to turn something you love into your work and be



Afi showcasing some of his nifty dance moves.

able to make money with it."

To Razlee, the encouraging environment at RoundBox and Roy's confidence in him and his band mates were the foundation of his perseverance in music. He said: "Music is hard to learn, but if you love it, it makes it easier."

On his role as an instructor at RoundBox, he added: "I want to be like Roy. Just don't give up on the kids."

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