SIT graduate living her mum’s dream

Safarah Asmada manages 80 men in her marine engineering team

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— Safarah Asmada

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IT WAS her mother’s dream to work in the marine industry. But because of an accident that left her in a wheelchair, Miss Safarah Asmada’s mother, Madam S. Lills, never got to do it.

Two weeks ago, Miss Safarah got to live out her mother’s dream when she graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering with honours in naval architecture from Newcastle University through the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

Said Miss Safarah, who is now a production engineer with Keppel Singmarine: "My mum always wanted to work in the marine industry, but an accident 20 years ago made her paralysed from the waist down and she couldn’t achieve her dream.

"But now I can. And I can help my father pay for my mum’s medical and the household bills," said Miss Safarah, who started work at Keppel Singmarine seven months ago.

Keppel Singmarine is a division of Keppel Offshore & Marine, which specialises in shipbuilding.

Miss Safarah, who has a diploma in marine and offshore technology from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, is one of SIT’s first cohort of some 50 graduates.

The tertiary institution held its first graduation ceremony at Resorts World Convention Centre on Jan 11.

In a man’s world

Although she has achieved what her mother was not able to, Miss Safarah, who received a scholarship from Keppel Offshore & Marine to get her degree, said it hasn’t been easy being a woman in the world of marine engineering.

For example, it was tough in the beginning to have about 80 men under her charge. Their job is to make panels for vessels and rigs.

"They probably saw that I was new and didn’t respect me as an engineer," said Miss Safarah.

The 1.6m-tall engineer said that some of the workers would try to "bluff" her when she first started on the job.

"I can’t do this," she would say that a panel had not gone up when it had, and I would report the wrong information at a meeting, only to have a project manager correct me in front of everyone," she said.

After persevering for two months, Miss Safarah became more familiar with the job and won the respect of the workers.

A typical day for Miss Safarah would mean waking up at 5am and catching the company bus which takes her from her home in Bukit Batok to work at Benel Road.

She goes to work in a T-shirt and jeans, but changes to overalls, safety boots and protective goggles when she reaches the office.

"I have to get up early in the morning, in the beginning, but she has become used to it.

The nature of her work also means that Miss Safarah has to work weekends if there are workers working at the shipyard.

"You don’t get a day off (during projects), not even on Hari Raya, but the pay is good — about $3,000, and there is a six months bonus," she said.

Then, there is the constant need to be vigilant to ensure that the men under her charge follow safety procedures.

"You’re not supposed to carry a lighter in your pocket or anything flammable.

"There could be colourless and odourless gases on board the ship and if someone is doing welding works, there is an explosion could happen and lives could be lost," she said.

Her uncle, Mr Yamar Hamid, 39, who has worked on rigs, agreed, and said: "It’s not easy for a woman to succeed in this line you have to be strict with workers and you have to have courage to deal with life-threatening accidents. But I know she can do it.

"Her mother, Madam S. Lills, 45, and her father, Mr Asmadi Bahijan, 48, a supervisor, told The New Paper that they were proud of their daughter’s achievements.

Said Madam S. Lills, "Safarah was very consistent in her studies and I’m very happy that she got a scholarship and now this job which she loves.”