

Being intellectually disabled is no hindrance to a good marriage, attest two couples from Japan who were in Malaysia recently for a holiday. They share their experiences with LEE SOO HOON.

Blissfully married

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Tetsuo Kitajima and his wife Toyomi are intellectually challenged people who have been married for 10 years now.

WHEN Emiko Fujino, 51, first met Masahiro Fujino, 49, she was not impressed. However, she soon took notice when he started lavishing her with gifts that included a personal computer, a karaoke player and CDs of her favourite songs. He eventually proposed and she accepted. They have stayed happily married for 17 years.

This would have been your normal boy-meets-girl love story but it is not. Both Masahiro and Emiko have intellectual disabilities. And when these individuals come with a "special" tag, getting married is no simple affair. In fact, when Masahiro's younger brother learnt about his wedding, he was furious. He refused to attend the wedding ceremony, convinced that his intellectually disabled brother would not be able to cope with the responsibilities of a married life. It was only three years later, after meeting his brother and sister-in-law at their apartment, that he realised how happy they were.

The couple now live in a rented apartment in Tokushima, Japan. Masahiro who works in a garbage disposal company earns a monthly salary of 150,000 yen (RM5,085). This explains how he was able to afford expensive gifts for his wife. Emiko works as an office cleaner and earns 50,000 yen (RM1,695) each month. The couple work very hard to earn money and buy things to fill their home.

What was Emiko's first impression of her husband? "Not a romantic man. Just a normal guy," she related shyly through an interpreter. How did Masahiro propose? "I told her I want to have a family. Please marry me," said the soft-spoken Masahiro in Japanese. Both confessed that they were happy with each other and did not quarrel. Masahiro added that he loved his wife's cooking, especially her *oden* (a Japanese dish quite similar to our *yong tow foo*).

The Fujinos were among the four couples with intellectual disabilities who visited Penang recently for a short holiday. They currently live in the community with some support from the Wakatake Support Centre for Community Living in Tokushima, Japan.

Contrary to the quiet Fujino couple, the Kitajimas were keener to share their love

story through the help of an interpreter. Toyomi Kitajima, 35, was quite pleased to admit that she was the one who courted her husband, Tetsuo Kitajima, 39.

After meeting and knowing him for a month at the Wakatake halfway house, she asked him to be her boyfriend. However, Tetsuo who was not overly impressed with Toyomi at that time, had taken three days to consider before agreeing to the idea. Two months later at a corridor she asked him: "Marry me." This time, however, Tetsuo did not need three days before making a decision. On the spot he agreed to the proposal.

Having lived together for 10 years, both felt that they were perfect for each other.

"There is nothing I want to change about her. She does the house chores and cooking."

Tetsuo added that his wife was a good cook and his favourite was baked fish with fried rice. "My husband is a very nice man with a good temper," Toyomi reciprocated when asked what she liked about Tetsuo.

Tetsuo works as a cleaner for Sangyo Company, while Toyomi irons shirts in a knitting factory.

Toyomi observed that married life has changed her husband. "Now he does not quarrel with his friends like he used to. Because of that, people are also treating him more kindly," she said.

When the topic of children was brought up, Tetsuo said they wanted to have children initially but later changed their minds after realising that taking care of a child was a big responsibility. What advice do they have for couples who want to get married?

"Talk it out with the supporting staff and your parents," said Tetsuo.

Kazuyo Nakazawa, 59, who had worked closely with both couples was involved in social work for people with intellectual disabilities in Japan for 26 years. She related that the Fujinos together with another couple with intellectual disabilities from Wakatake's halfway house were the first two couples to be married in Tokushima. The prefecture government had sponsored a grand wedding ceremony for them.

Kazuyo who was a staff member at Wakatake for 16 years said: "The Fujinos never imagined that they could get married due to public prejudice.

Staff at Wakatake saw how happy they were together. We knew that they would be happy if we could give them some support so they could lead an ordinary life."

She added that when the Fujinos first got married, they were already almost independent in their daily living skills, except for managing their finances. As for the Kitajima couple, more support was needed. For the first three years after their marriage, staff from Wakatake provided daily support for the couple which included cooking, cleaning and money management. Today the staff only help with money matters and occasional house cleaning.

Kazuyo's opinion that society should respect the will of people with disabilities who want to get married was also shared by her husband, Ken, 63. Ken, a visiting professor, left Japan and came to Penang 10 years ago. In 1996 he started Asia Community Service, a local charity organisation which provides services for people with intellectual disabilities.

However, Ken stressed that it was important for the staff involved to explain to the couple many times about the responsibilities involved before taking the big step. The couple would have to consider if they could solve problems and support themselves.

He also said that in Japan, government laws relating to persons with disabilities made it easier for couples with disabilities to get married compared to Malaysia. In Japan, in addition to financial allowances for people with disabilities, there are the quota, levy and grant system which play a central role in promoting employment for disabled persons.

Under the quota system, 2.1% of the total employment in the government and 1.8% of the total employment in private enterprises are allocated for disabled persons. Private enterprises which fail to fulfil the quota of employing disabled workers will have to pay a levy to the government. Funds created by the levy system are used to encourage employers who employ disabled workers above the quota in the form of allowances and grants.

Both husband and wife agreed that in most cases, marriage has changed the couples for the better.

"When the 'stronger' marries the 'weaker', he can help her to lead a better life," Kazuyo said, citing the Fujino couple as an example. She explained that Emiko came from a very poor family and her parents were street beggars. After marriage, Fujino was able to provide for her. She was motivated to work hard and earn money to buy things for their home.

Kazuyo also pointed out that Emiko had emotional problems before she got married. "She was aggressive and would physically attack others at her workplace as well as at the halfway house. At night, she would wander around the house crying. After settling into her married life, she has become emotionally stable. She told the staff at Wakatake that 'I want to make warm home'. To the Fujino couple, their rented apartment was their palace."

To date, 21 couples with intellectual disabilities have married and are living in the community in Tokushima. Three couples have divorced, while the rest remained happily married.

■ One Voice is a monthly column which serves as a platform for professionals, parents and careproviders of children with learning difficulties. Feedback on the column can be sent to dignity@tm.net.my. For enquiries of services and support groups, please call Malaysian Care (☎ 03-9058 2102) or Dignity & Services (☎ 03-7783 0849).