

From snake phobia to fascination

Fireman conquers fear of reptiles to become department's resident expert

MARANG: He used to be deathly afraid of snakes but Muhammad Azizi Abd Aziz still braved himself to go ahead and fulfil his ambition to become a firefighter after obtaining his Sijil Pelajaraan Malaysia certificate.

He persisted with his goal despite knowing fully well that capturing and handling snakes were part of a fireman's duties.

Today, the young man is the go-to person for information or advice on snake capturing and handling in Terengganu.

The 21-year-old joined the Terengganu Fire and Rescue Department as a firefighter in June 2016 and was stationed in Kuala Terengganu.

"I used to be repulsed by snakes. Whenever I went out with my friends, they loved to pull my leg by suddenly shouting 'snake!', and I would be the first to run away," said Muhammad Azizi, who is now a trainer at the Fire and Rescue Academy located at Wakaf Tapai here.

Recalling the first course he was required to attend as a fireman, he said he initially thought he would only have to learn about the reptiles in theory.

"I didn't realise we would have to handle live snakes.

"By the time we got there (the practical), I had no choice but to fight my fear and face them.

"Otherwise, there was no point in



me becoming a fireman."

Touching a snake for the first time was a very difficult thing to do, he admitted.

Then, as the course advanced, somehow his phobia became less intense as he grew more familiar

with the serpents and even plucked up the courage to hold one with his bare hands.

When the course ended, not only did his fear disappear but he also developed a fascination for the slithery reptiles, a number of which

were venomous.

Apparently, the Tumpat native from Kelantan and the youngest in his family of six is the only expert in snake capturing and handling in the state.

Terengganu Fire and Rescue

Respect for the 'king':

Muhammad Azizi (left) and colleague Safiq Mohamad showing their skills with a King Cobra at the Waqaf Tapai Fire and Rescue Academy in Terengganu. — Bernama

Department director Azlimin Mat Noor entrusted Muhammad Azizi with the task of conducting courses on handling and capturing poisonous animals for the department staff, beginning this year.

His courses will be attended by firefighters from all over Malaysia.

Over the past one-and-a-half years, Muhammad Azizi has been involved in more than 100 cases in Terengganu where he and his colleagues were summoned to capture snakes by members of the public who found them in their homes or in public places.

There have also been times when he had to dice with danger. On one occasion, his right eye was almost blinded after it was struck by venom spat out by a cobra.

Fortunately, his quick intervention saved his eyesight.

Asked what happened to the snakes after they were captured, Muhammad Azizi said they were taken back to the academy and kept in cages as they came in handy for training.

Usually, when new snakes are caught, the "older" ones kept at the academy are released into the jungle.

"We prefer to use the newly captured snakes for our training sessions because they are still aggressive and our trainees get to learn to handle them," he said.

"Those kept in captivity for a long time tend to become tame."