

**Nazir:** I would never compromise my principles for anything

# The Son Also Rises

Datuk Seri Nazir Ariff wears many hats: he is an ubër successful corporate and business figure, a philanthropist, and is one of the pillars of the social scene in Penang. He tells **Sharmila Valli Narayanan** of his father's endearing influence, the death of the tin industry, his entry into the property market and being a single parent.

**W**HEN Datuk Seri Nazir Ariff was conferred his 'Datuk Seri' award in 2008, one of the first things he did was to visit his father's grave to tell him the good news. His late father, Datuk Mushir Ariff, who died in 2007 at the age of 89, had always told Nazir that he deserved to be made a Datuk Seri one day.

'All the awards that I achieved were an achievement to him,' says Nazir, who is the Deputy Chairman and Executive Director of Ivory Properties Group Bhd. 'Throughout my life, dad put a lot of targets for me to achieve. He wanted me to do things he could not,' Nazir tells **Malaysian Business** in a telephone interview.

A father wanting to live vicariously through the son: all the elements for a difficult and explosive father-son relationship. But it was never like that. If there was a lot of pressure from father to son, there was also a lot of love.

Nazir cites his father, demanding as he was, as one of the biggest influences in his life. 'Dad was a disciplinarian, a man of absolute principals,' recalls the son proudly. 'Even when I was in my fifties, whenever I made a decision, I used to wonder whether my dad would approve of it. In a way, his death made me feel a huge burden was lifted off my back and I could do what I wanted to. But now, whenever I achieve something, there is no one to share it with and to talk to,' he says with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

'Dad was very proud of me but he never told me that, but he told the whole world instead. Typical of fathers of that generation,' he chuckles.

Those who knew the father will see him in the son. 'Everything about me – from my looks, the way I talk – I am a straight-talker just like him – to the fact that I am a socialite who loves to entertain – everything is just like him,' says Nazir.

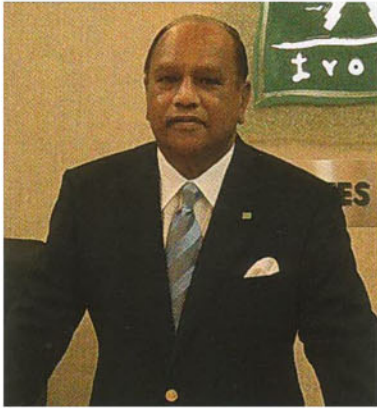
## EARLY DAYS

Nazir is one of the true blue bloods of Penang. He hails from the famous Ariff clan – the Peranakan Jawi family – whose forebears include Dr Sir Kamil Ariff, a famous and respected physician and a legendary figure on the island. His parents were the doyennes of high society and philanthropy in Penang.

His mom, a sprightly and dynamic woman of 82, is still active in various charitable organisations in Penang.

Nazir may have had a formidable father to push him but he is very much a self-made man. He first made a name for himself in the tin industry. Although his father's connection got him the job at the Eastern Smelting Company (later Datuk Keramat Holdings), one of the largest smelting companies in the country, it was his sheer hard work that propelled him to be the first Asian to head the company.

'I got noticed because I was the one who always volunteered to do the job that nobody wanted to do because it



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was too difficult,' he says. It was one of the lessons that he has passed down to his children: to be noticed, one has to do something different.

When Nazir entered the tin industry in the early 1970s, tin together with rubber were the twin pillars of the country's economy. By the time he left the industry more than 30 years later, the industry had ceased to exist. Does he mourn the death of the tin industry?

'Not really,' comes the quick reply. The demise of the tin industry was an inevitable process as the country became industrialised,' rationalises Nazir. 'It became difficult to get workers, the production came down while cost went up and the government was not encouraging the mining industry by giving out mining leases. Furthermore, the tin industry became an environmentally unfriendly industry.'

The formation of wasteland, damage to natural drainage, pollution and destruction of natural habitats were just some of the environmental hazards of the tin industry. 'I don't think that the tin industry will ever be revived again,' he says with finality.

#### NEW CHALLENGE

The end of the tin era opened a new passage in Nazir's life. At 60, when most men would be looking forward to their retirement, Nazir entered a new industry – property development – by joining Ivory Properties Group Bhd.

'For me, this was a new area and the learning curve has been steep. I am working for one of the most advanced property developers in the country. We do everything – from planning to the construction, development and right down to the management of the property,' he says excitedly.

Recently listed on Bursa Malaysia, Penang-based Ivory Properties has carved a sterling reputation as a capable developer for having amassed a Gross Development Value (GDV) of RM3.4 billion solely from its home base a mere 11 years after its inception. Among others, it is the developer of the RM1.26 billion Penang Times Square project which spans 5.2 hectares and marks Penang's entry into the world of Times Square.

Nazir, who will be turning 64 in November (he says he feels like he is 48), has a hectic work schedule that would tire men half his age. To him, many people tend to use age as an excuse not to do anything.

'Physically I am strong – I play tennis, go to the gym and the disco. I am always amazed when I meet people, especially civil servants who moan that they are getting old. Most of them would have hardly touched 55 and I tell them I am several years their senior and still feel young at heart,' he says with an infectious grin in his voice.

Retirement then is not on the cards for Nazir. 'I intend to work full-time until I am 70 and then take it slow by working half-days,' he reveals. He shudders at the idea of retiring full-time.

'Imagine waking up every morning with nothing to do. My goodness, that's miserable!' But that does not mean Nazir just works with no play. He parties hard. He loves entertaining friends and to be entertained. He

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takes three holidays a year where he disappears overseas.

'It's only when I am abroad that I am relaxed,' he declares. 'I love the anonymity overseas where nobody recognises me and I can do whatever I like.'

#### FAILURE

For all the successes that he has chalked up in life, there is one area in his life where he has met with failure. His marriage ended 17 years ago. But Nazir was determined to succeed as a father.

He took custody of his four children (three sons and a daughter) and never remarried because he did not want to risk bringing someone else into their lives. He juggled buying pampers and board meetings; going for school concerts and presenting yearly reports to the board. And he was never far from his children even when he was travelling.

'I used to call them everyday whenever I travelled. I am proud to say I was there for every pivotal moment of their lives,' says the proud papa. In hindsight, he thinks that the divorce was a blessing.

'I don't think I would have been as close to my children today if I were still married. Because I was a single father, I made the extra effort to be there in their lives,' he says. 'The sacrifices that I made for them like not marrying etc – that's no big deal. Women do it all the time – why not men?' he asks.

Would he have done anything differently in life? He pauses for a while before answering. Sometimes when I look back, I think I probably could have been a little more diplomatic, patient and receptive.

'But I would never have been able to live with myself if I was like that because it's against all that I believe in. I have always been a straight-talking person,' admits Nazir. 'I cannot be a hypocrite. As far as I am concerned, honesty is still the best policy. I would never compromise my principals for anything. I sleep well at night because I don't have guilt or nightmares.'

That's something that dad would have definitely approved. 