

My mum was the first woman MP of Kuala Kangsar

PIONEER: Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz was not the only woman who represented Kuala Kangsar in Parliament. In 1974, the MP for the royal town was Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar. Raja Khalidatul Asrin speaks to Onn Zariah's daughter, Ruby Idris



Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar (left) with her eldest daughter, Ruby Idris.

AN extrovert, the late Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar never got tired of entertaining guests.

"In fact, that was the trait that everyone in Kuala Kangsar loved about my mother," said her eldest daughter, 57-year-old Ruby Idris.

She said Onn Zariah was involved in politics in the 1970s, and became the member of parliament (MP) after winning the Kuala Kangsar seat in 1974, at the age of 46.

"She had charisma and strength of character, was gentle in her speech and, most of all, she was humble.

"My mother was advised by then Umno president Tun Abdul Razak Hussein to contest in the 1974 gen-

eral election, and she won," said Ruby, as she reminisced about those heady days, which she said felt quite similar to the election fever sweeping Kuala Kangsar now.

Ruby said Onn Zariah was the second child of two girls, and was born and raised in Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar.

Her mother was familiar with the royal families and the *adat diraja* (royal customs) to the point that she was given the title of Toh Bijayawati by the then Perak sultan, Sultan Idris Shah II.

Onn Zariah herself received the title of "Datuk" from another Perak sultan, Sultan Azlan Muhibbuddin Shah.

Ruby said her mother was first

married to Datuk Panglima Kinta Che Wan Mohd Yusuff, a wealthy Malay nobleman in the Kinta Valley. They had two sons.

When Che Wan died, Ruby said her mother became involved in helping the underprivileged.

"She was a member of several non-governmental organisations, including the Malaysia Muslim Welfare Organisation (Perkim). She was also the chairman of the Perak Muslim Women's Welfare Board and Perak Women's Association."

Ruby said her mother later married her father, Datuk Idris Abdul Salim, and they had five children — two sons and three daughters.

As the eldest daughter, Ruby recalled how her mother was always surrounded by people, due to her job as an MP.

"Our house was always full of people from Umno, Perkim and many

other organisations. Umno meetings, at that time, were usually held at our house in Jalan Datoh in Ipoh.

"We didn't have much in the way of privacy, but that was the sacrifice my mother made by being an MP," she said, adding that sometimes villagers would come to their house by the busloads.

"Yes, busloads of villagers, whom we always entertained with open hearts," she said with a proud smile.

"Due to the lack of facilities and transportation at the time, my mother would also take a sampan to visit her constituents on the other

side of Sungai Perak in Kuala Kangsar," she said.

Being a wealthy woman in her own right, Ruby said Onn Zariah had never said no to anyone who needed help.

"She was always on the road to Kuala Kangsar since she stayed in Ipoh, which is only 35km away. In between, she would be in Kuala Lumpur for meetings and Parliament sittings.

"Her strong ties with the Umno grassroots cannot be denied. Back then, it was not about how highly-educated one was, but the way one handled the rakyat.

"She was always there for the people of Kuala Kangsar, and although she was a pious lady, she did not go around judging others where religion was concerned," said Ruby.

As a mother, Ruby said Onn Zariah was gentle yet firm with her children, and they all turned out well.

Of all her children, only her eldest son from her first marriage, Datuk Seri Dr Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan, followed in her footsteps. He became the Bukit Gantang MP, a post he served for four terms, and held the deputy defence minister's post.

"The beautiful thing about my mother is that she managed to keep her family closely knit, even though she was seldom at home.

"She was the MP for Kuala Kangsar for one term, but she was an active Umno member till the end.

"My mother was one of five women who received the Pingat Tun Fatimah for her contributions to the country.

"Sometimes, I wonder where she got all that energy," said Ruby, who was with her mother till her last breath.

Onn Zariah died of uterus cancer at the age of 80.

The Kuala Kangsar parliamentary constituency was later represented by Yong Fatimah Mohd Razali (1978-1982) and Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz (1982 to 2013) before the late Datuk Wan Mohammad Khairil Anuar Wan Ahmad won the seat in 2013.



1 Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar (right) at an Umno meeting.



2 Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar at home.



3 Toh Puan Onn Zariah Abu Bakar with her husband, Datuk Idris Abdul Salim.