

*Enterprise*

# Young Entrepreneurs: Empowering students to discover their passion and purpose

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About six years ago, the four teenage founders of Ascendance Sdn Bhd were living separate lives and scraping by with their secondary and tertiary education. The eldest among them, Mathura Kannan, was 19 and the only one in college.

The four of them used to accompany their parents to the events of business incubator platform ET Ideas. There, they had the opportunity to meet many business owners, including those who ran small enterprises and CEOs of large multinational corporations (MNCs).

ET Ideas then decided to conduct a programme called ET Youth for the children who frequented the place. Harsha Ravindran, the youngest of the four (11 years old at the time), says the sessions were “very different from the stuff she learnt at school”.

“For the first time, people were talking about goal-setting and following our hearts to achieve whatever we set our minds on. It was a culture shock because we realised that there was more to life than just school and we could have fun and do the things we love to do,” she adds.

Harsha is now 17 and chief marketing officer at Ascendance.

During the programme, all four of them had their own lightbulb moments. They also managed to achieve the goals they set at ET Ideas which, unlike those of their peers, had nothing to do with school.

“Our classmates had no idea what to do with their lives. And although they had a lot of potential, there was no one to teach them the things we were learning,” says Harsha.

The four of them had the same mentor — ET Ideas founder Elango Thiyagu — and, at different times, had expressed the need for a similar programme targeted at students. “The adults we met kept saying that if they had known all this when they were younger, they would be way more successful now,” says Harsha.

Elango then put the four of them together. “[ET Ideas] did not want to do it because they catered to adults. But they pushed us to develop something for youngsters,” she says.

However, they were not ready to coach other students. They believed in practising what they preached, so they focused on their own growth and leading by example.

At the time, Harsha wanted to attend Nilai International School for her secondary education, but the fees were too expensive. By applying what she learnt at ET Ideas, she worked towards her goal of getting a scholarship.

Over time, Harsha performed better academically and in her extra-curricular activities. Eventually, she and her elder sister, Heerraa, were awarded full scholarships worth RM150,000 for their secondary school education.

Heerraa, who is 20 this year and Ascendance's chief operating officer, had wanted to be a singer since she was five years old. But she did not know how to go about it. During her time at ET Ideas, she developed her talent by writing and composing her own songs.

"I was not excelling in my studies and I wanted to avoid the stereotype of being a dropout musician. So, I put in as much effort into my school work as I did my music," she says.

Today, Heerraa has songs on Spotify and has performed in many shows all over Kuala Lumpur.

The fourth founder and the company's chief content officer, Sanadtkumar Ganesan, had a passion for filmmaking when he enrolled in ET Ideas. Initially, he was shy about embracing his passion. But when the people at ET Ideas asked him to film and edit one of their talk shows, he came out of his shell.

Mathura, the 23-year-old CEO of Ascendance, continues to focus on college.

### **Ascendance ascends**

It almost seemed silly that the four of them had come to the same place for years, but had never spoken to each other. However, once they were brought together by their mentor, things took off. They came up with so many ideas and finally started Ascendance in 2015.

Not everything took off straightaway, of course. Mathura points out that the company went through a period of trial and error before it developed the right programme for students. Actually, Ascendance started out as a project rather than a business entity because the founders were too young to register a company.

First, they attempted to reach students by producing an e-book called *The Seven Basic Laws of Nature*, but it was not very successful as not many students picked it up. Then, they started developing content for their website and platform such as videos, talk shows and training sessions.

“We wanted to reach out to as many individuals as possible. We learnt that there is no such thing as just being successful in your career. You need to be a successful human being and always give back to society. That was what we saw at ET Ideas and that was the message we wanted to spread,” says Mathura.

They decided to focus on empowering students between the ages of 10 and 17 and started hosting live talk shows at a tuition centre because they assumed that a personal sharing session would work well among the youth. A small crowd of 30 turned up for the first session and the founders were ecstatic. But when they organised something similar a month later, only one person turned up.

“Something was not working and we had to figure out what it was. Then, we realised that students could not connect well with someone much older — the talk show guest was Elango and the students were in Form 3. The message was good, but it did not get through,” says Harsha.

So, they worked on their programmes to better suit the needs of students. While ET Ideas’ programmes were effective and served as a reference point, they needed to adapt them for teenagers.

“We learnt that the most effective way to teach youngsters is to see what they need at that particular point in time. We can come up with the best syllabus but if they choose to mentally check out that day, what is the point?” says Mathura.

Soon, they were ready to test these out. But then came their next hurdle — finding a centre that would allow them to carry out their programmes.

Harsha did random online searches for home schools and tuition centres in Selangor. From there, she cold-called about 120 centres whenever she had some free time — during her one-hour bus ride to and from school in Nilai and her 20-minute lunch break at school. They prayed hard for at least one person to say yes.

“Most were not very receptive, but five tuition and home-schooling centres were kind enough to give us a try. We agreed on a year-long programme where we would work with the students once a week to develop their mindset,” says Harsha.

Over time, they noticed that the students showed signs of improvement. For some, the improvement was marked such as acing a subject they had been failing previously. Word got out and other centres in the area wanted Ascendance to give their students a better attitude as well.

The founders felt that they were ready to take on the world at this point, but they were still using their own resources to fund, develop and sustain the programme. They needed more support. So, in April 2016, they launched a two-month IndieGoGo campaign and raised RM66,000. With the money, they started the “Ascendance on the Road” programme, which took them to rural communities.

“As unrealistic as it sounds, we wanted to go as far as we could within Selangor. So, we spent a lot of time on the road. It was good for us because we got to meet students from the rural areas of Sepang and Kuala Selangor. And they were the ones who needed it the most,” says Mathura.

The programme went on for about 1½ years and they deepened their understanding of younger students. “We welcomed honest feedback and sometimes they would point out what worked and what did not, and we would try to fix it,” she says.

There are three parts to the programme — the transformation programme, the experiential learning and entrepreneurial insights segment and the project phase. The programme comprises monthly full-day sessions and

sometimes more, if time permits.

The first part of the programme focuses on the students' mindsets and allows them to learn about themselves and their passion. The second part is on experiential learning so that students have the opportunity to focus on practical skills on top of just theory.

“We work with various companies to get the students to experience what it is like in the real world. For example, we brought them to a media company because a lot of them said they wanted to be actors or filmmakers. The media company gave them access to state-of-the-art equipment for a day to make their own film,” says Mathura.

Finally, the third part of the programme allows students to carry out their own sustainable and high-impact project based on their area of interest. Ascendance provides the students with guidance and support to help them realise their dreams.

“We do not believe in just a one-year programme. We want them to stay on after because phase three is when they actually do what they love,” says Mathura.

“Most start their own projects because they are not old enough to own a business. But here, they can incubate their project and develop their business in a way that it can be future-ready.”

### **The proof of the pudding**

People started noticing Ascendance because of its impact on a number of students who had started to excel in school and life. Some of those who had gone through the programme later went on to become international dancers or filmmakers. Its reputation grew and before the founders knew it, they had worked with almost 600 students across 13 institutions.

As Ascendance gained traction, they were invited to share their story at a conference in Malaysia. A participant, who was with the National Kidney Foundation, approached them and asked why the programme was not done in public schools, which actually needed it.

“The person pointed out that most teachers do not have the capacity to give their attention to every student and that usually in these schools, only the top scorers receive attention and get to attend programmes,” says Mathura.

“At that point, we did not think about it and we did not know how to work with schools. That person introduced us to someone in the Ministry of Education and from there, we applied to try out our programme in government schools. We were given the space to carry out a pilot project in January last year.”

The government programme is called “Ace it Easy” and it received full support from both the previous and current administrations because it has produced good results among students. Ascendance works closely with the school’s administration, usually the principal, to handpick classes for the programme. Typically, they take in Form 4 students from the middle to last class.

“Every school has a group of students that the teachers know have a lot of potential. Those are the ones we would like to work with. Ideally, we would like to reach out to all the students. But right now, we are focusing on these because that is as much as our resources allow us to do,” says Mathura.

This year, Ascendance was one of the recipients of The 2019 Diana Award. It recognises humanitarian and social work done by youth around the world and is given in memory of Diana, Princess of Wales.

Ascendance is currently working with four schools, an orphanage, a B40 group and two public groups. It decided not to take on too many students this year because previously, it was difficult to give each student the attention they needed.

Right now, the founders are building what they call The A-Team, which comprises students who have gone through the programme and want to empower the next batch of students. They have also brought on board corporate partners to help sustain the social enterprise and are currently working with about 30 partners to get the necessary resources for their programmes.

### **Focusing on their day jobs**

While the founders focus most of their time and energy on Ascendance, they have carved out their own career paths. Mathura is currently a junior director at an accounting firm called Simply Empowering and is in training to take over the company while Harsha runs her own start-up called startmyname.com, which creates personalised websites for people and helps them develop their brand.

Harsha's love for website development and marketing started when she was an intern at Globetrotter Consultancy in December 2016. She started by responding to emails sent to the company but soon promoted herself to making phone calls to CEOs to set up meetings with the company she was working for. Eventually, she was promoted to head of branding for her hard work and dedication.

Harsha has spoken at three TEDx conferences so far — TEDxYouth@SKIS, TEDxMonash University Malaysia and TEDxIMU at the International Medical University.

Sanadtkumar is developing his skills as a filmmaker at ET Boost, a production house run by ET Ideas. Enrolled in its leadership programme, he is pursuing a learn-on-the-job education path and is currently producing a documentary. He works closely with Heerraa, who is also at ET Boost and looking to change the world through her music by writing positive songs. She also performs in and around Kuala Lumpur at cafés, open mic events, conferences and festivals.

The common denominator among the four of them that propelled their self-esteem was the feeling of not being treated like reckless kids when they were in their teens. They all had personal hurdles to overcome and based on their experiences, they believed that students should be taught how to solve their own problems in a way that suits them.

The focus on soft skills is often forgotten and what they are trying to bring out in students is the ability to understand themselves well enough so they can address life's challenges effectively, says Mathura. "If you can teach students to think and solve their own problems, they can apply this to anything.

"The truth is, we can never tell someone how to solve their problems or how to study better. Intensive tuition classes never work. But if they know how to solve their own problems, they will figure out what method works best for them."

Sanadtkumar is a good example. In school, he hated history as he was a visually-driven person who connected to emotions on screen. When he realised what worked for his brain, he started creating visuals and turned his textbook into a story with emotions. Before he knew it, he started acing a subject he used to fail.

"Everyone has different methods of doing things. Some people require a lot of colourful things. But if we do not do things that help us figure it out, then you will not learn these things about yourself. What is important is finding out what works for you," says Sanadtkumar.

His journey into filmmaking was not all fun and games. He also took the time to learn the values and characteristics needed to be a good filmmaker. "I learnt about everything else that happens behind the scenes of filmmaking such as teamwork and communication with clients," he says.

"The trust that was put in me helped eliminate any self-doubt and insecurities that stopped me from being who I am, propelling me further to succeed as a filmmaker. Inadvertently, the other aspects of my life started

improving, such as my education and relationship with my family.”

Because of Sanadtkumar’s passion, he is a natural go-to mentor for students who want to delve into filmmaking. He applies the same principles used on him and treats the students like adults.

“If you treat them like children, they may not take things seriously. But if you show them respect and trust them with adult responsibilities, what they can achieve seems to be limitless,” he says.

“For example, when they walk into a studio with a green screen and lights, the first thing we tell them is that they need to be careful and not break anything. Then, we throw them into the deep end of experiential learning by giving them the creative freedom to plan, direct and shoot their own short film.

“Some of the children are as young as nine years old and while there are liability worries when we hand them expensive equipment, we know that if we do not trust them, they will not take things seriously. The moment you give children a big responsibility, they put their best foot forward and perform exceptionally.”

For Mathura, it was emotion management that she needed help with. Although it may not seem to be relevant to her career as an accountant, she has focused on communicating better with her family and building a better relationship with her parents.

“I addressed other aspects of my life that is not defined by my career and business. It is about me as a human being. After I developed my emotion management skills, there was a domino effect and not just my family relationships fell into place but also other aspects of my life,” she says.

Harsha’s focus was on her subconscious mind because she was a creature of habit who sometimes did things automatically without thinking. She explains that it is normal for students to involuntarily sabotage themselves. “For me, it was about fighting my own subconscious programming, which was pretty much an internal fight for me,” she says.

Heerraa needed to find a greater purpose in life because she did not see how her primary and secondary education was going to contribute to her passion for singing. She was tired and ready to give up on herself, but it all changed when she met people who believed in her vision.

“The switch happened because I wanted to be so much more than I could be. When I met people who believed in me and worked with me on my music, the least I could do was work on myself and get everything else in order. I could not just work on my music and abandon everything else because my mother still had to pay for it,” she says.

Heerraa went from having no purpose to becoming fully engaged. “I started relating school to real life, like physics, and connected the things I learnt in school with the things around me, knowing for the first time that there was more than just school,” she says.

Despite having their own career paths, the four of them still consider their work at Ascendance their full-time job because it not only helped them learn more about themselves but they have also grown as individuals and as a company for the past three years. They are open to collaborations with educational institutions, corporates and other organisations that will help them impact more lives.

“We focus on continually building the company and reaching out to as many people as we can, making sure that we maintain the quality of the programme. There have been requests from other states, some as far as Sabah and Sarawak, but we do not have the resources either in terms of funding or our emotional capacity. But we are looking to take on more classes next year and want to continue growing and inspiring more students,” says Mathura.

