

My first parade was awesome

By TY Wong

Watching the National Day Parade on TV was an annual family event when he was a young boy, recalls MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Hri Kumar Nair, who is the youngest of nine children.

And so, when he finally got a chance to participate and be part of the celebrations at the stadium as a drummer in the mass band, it was “awesome”.

“I was either in Sec 3 or 4 in 1981 or 1982. It was good fun and we had a great time.”

He recalled: “I felt such a sense of awe... such a proud feeling to be part of all that. There was a sense of occasion.”

Fast forward to 2006: The first time the 40-year-old lawyer was at the parade as a Member of Parliament, a VIP.

Reflecting on that moment, he said: “When you are young, the feelings are different, more raw.



MP Nair (middle) says taking part in a National Day Parade made him feel proud.



MP Hri Kumar Nair

“But when you are older, it takes a lot more to get excited that same way.

“As an MP, while I enjoyed myself and thought the show to be very professional, it was not the same uplifting feeling. Maybe it’s because of age.”

While August is the month Singapore’s independence is celebrated, the preceding month, July, is when its multi-cultural diversity and racial harmony is appreciated.

Racial Harmony Month was launched in 2002 to promote more interaction and a greater understanding between the races, in the wake of the Jemaah Islamiah terror threats.

Mr Nair, who is an Indian but who studied Mandarin in school, has had his share of awkward moments as well as hurtful remarks.

“People would make disparaging remarks in Mandarin thinking I wouldn’t understand.”

He shrugs off those occasions, saying: “I suppose that’s when you hear what they honestly think of you.”

Most of the remarks were made by young people, or children, he recalls. Very much like when kids name call.

Mr Nair, whose accountant wife is Chinese, said: “While I get a bit cheesed off, I never get worked up by these things, as I’ve accepted it as part of life. My friends are not like that.”

But there have been funny moments.

Like when he started junior college and every one in class was new. Two Chinese boys sitting behind him started making fun of him while they were waiting for the teacher. He did not respond.

Shortly afterwards, when the teacher was going down the list and mentioned that he was taking Chinese, those boys were shocked.

He said: “The look on their faces was really something.”

Over time, however, they became friends. He found out they were from SAP (Special Assistance Plan) schools and had never known someone of another race.

As an adult, though, his race has not been an issue.

“Being a lawyer, when you deal with people in a professional context, race is not a problem.”

But, as an MP, he said: “I have met a number of constituents who claim to have been discriminated against in job interviews. We can legislate against such discrimination, but how do you police it? Hiring is a purely subjective act, and an employer can ascribe any reason for his decision.

“At the end of the day, society has to become more colour-blind. I don’t think it’s inconsistent to be more culturally aware and yet realise that everyone can be equally capable.”