

The ILCA Conference Experience – A rewarding journey of love, friendship, passion and lifelong dedication!

July 13-17th 2011, San Diego, California, USA

There is a saying that goes:

“Everything we go through in life brings us to where we were meant to be”.

I truly believe that. Who would have thought that my change of profession would bring me to where I am today. In 2008, I made the decision to quit from my corporate job to focus on becoming a Lactation Consultant. I fell in love with breastfeeding in 2001, when I had my first child, Adam. Since then, I have been involved with helping mothers and babies to successfully breastfeed through an informal mother-to-mother support setup. Some people thought I was wasting my skills as a trained IT Professional but in my heart, I knew what I wanted. I have never once regretted the decision. Being a lactation consultant will not make me rich but it is the lives that I touch that will enrich me as a person. There is nothing more rewarding than that! Words could never express.....

Being given the opportunity to attend the ILCA conference as a scholarship recipient for the first time in 2011 was another life enriching experience for me. Despite having to travel for more than 24 hours, it was well worth it! I got to meet such wonderful people who have dedicated their life's work towards the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding, maternal and infant health. I took the opportunity to learn from top notch professionals in the field – Dr Peter Hartmann, Dr Jane Morton, Marsha Walker, Catherine Watson Genna, Kathy Kendall Tackett and so many others who were so generous and ever willing to share their knowledge with all of us there. It was to say the least, a truly humbling experience.

In Islam, we believe in the importance of education and the pursuit of knowledge is greatly encouraged as evidenced in the following words “Whoever follows a path in the pursuit of knowledge, Allah will make a path to Paradise easy for him.” (Al-Bukhaari) and The Prophet s.a.w said: "When a man dies, all his deeds come to an end except for three — an ongoing charity, beneficial KNOWLEDGE or a righteous child who will pray for him." (Muslim). When I was at the conference, I saw elderly IBCLC's , La Leche League leaders who came to the conference wheel chair bound, in a cane or walker. Their dedication, passion for knowledge truly inspired me. I can only wish or hope I could have at least 10% of what they have. I loved the Presidential Address and short sketch by Cathy Corothers and Katherine Healy which was about 2 IBCLC's growing old together. It was both truly hilarious and touching! There was laughter and tears. I saw many who could not help but cry in the end. How often do you get to experience a roomful of “oxytocin” and emotions going around? How often do you get to see a hall full of warm, caring and loving people? It's truly amazing! I later fantasized my colleagues and I attending the conference together when we grow old. How wonderful that would be! (I only hope the conference would be closer to home, though!)

There are times when I am overwhelmed with the work that we do, the politics of breastfeeding, having to fight a system that seems to constantly undermine a woman's ability and right to breastfeed. Sometimes, my colleagues and I feel lost or alone in this sacrifice and struggle. Sometimes, I don't think

people understand why we do the things we do. But being at ILCA, listening to all these people and their stories of struggle and sacrifice makes me stronger. It reminds me of why we must continue doing what we do. And we are not alone, it's not a lost battle because we can always draw the strength of others who have gone before us and now we get to stand on the shoulders of giants! We will continue this journey as we groom and nurture our future generation of mothers and leaders. This is a promise!

While I was there, I received the sad news of the death of my beloved grandmother. Before I left, I had promised to take care of her when I got back from the conference but sadly I never even got the chance to say goodbye. "Mak" as I fondly called her died peacefully at the age of 78. I will never forget her words of encouragement to me throughout my breastfeeding journey for all my children. She would always be the one to cheer me on! After all, she was a breastfeeding mother herself! She used to share the lovely and sometimes funny stories of her breastfeeding my mom (whom by the way breastfed for 7 years!) I will miss you "Mak", I will miss you dearly.....

A few days ago, I was invited to give a talk on breastfeeding in conjunction with World Breastfeeding Week. A mother with a baby in her arms and a little girl walked up to me and said "Pn Rita, do you remember me? I asked for your help 5 years ago when my daughter was still a baby". Looking down I saw a beautiful little girl who smiled at me with the most amazing smile. "Thank you for helping me. I couldn't have done it without your help. Now I'm breastfeeding my second child and I hope I would be able to do the same or even better!" Thank you for helping me. Masya Allah....what a feeling! People may forget what you said, people may even forget what you did but people will never forget how you made them feel. I will never, ever forget that feeling for the rest of my life!

I ask that Allah guide me and give me the strength to continue doing what I love most and I hope to be able to do this for many more years to come....for the rest of my life. InsyaAllah....

Humbly,

RITA RAHAYU OMAR, CISA, IBCLC

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