We Were Self-Taught

Fouzul Hameed, Managing Director, Hameedia is no stranger to hard work and persevering through challenges. He has created a name that is international as well as a symbol of quality and style. The only home-grown menswear brand in Sri Lanka, Fouzul Hameed speaks about their journey and the strength of being a family business. As the third generation too enters the business, he remembers the manner in which he worked and garnered knowledge through experience. He continues to innovate as Hameedia ventures forward.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography Menaka Aravinda

Describe your journey so far?
My journey has been very unique, because everything happened without my knowledge. It was led by the passion I had for this area of work, which is the passion to make good men's clothing, to produce a total look for a man and to make a man look like a gentleman. That was my dream. Everything happened to me at different stages. It is similar to being a sportsman, because to be great you have to continue to practice. I was always ready to try new things and practice my skill. Today I can proudly say that we are an international brand and when it comes to clothing for men, we match all international standards. That was my dream and it took me over 20 years to be where I am today.

I am planning to introduce a luxury collection this year. The biggest challenge for me is pitching this luxury line. When you talk of luxury clothing for men, the brands that come to mind are Louise Vuitton, Zegna and Canali. I will be pitching my luxury collection for the April season. In the meantime, I am in the process of upgrading my factory, stores and other areas.

Success has come to us at various stages. We must thank our parents for everything because it is they who gave us this business. We grew step by step and

it has been really amazing. We are not simply about making a garment or putting a label on it. Today, there are many who have immense talent in Sri Lanka. I thank Business Today for recognising people like us, who have developed home grown brands. Sri Lanka has talent and there are many opportunities but we face great challenges in our attempts to venture out. Sri Lankans are unique and passionate. In my speech at the Business Today Awards, I made a request to the Prime Minister that space must be given to local brands at the airport. I had to close our store at the airport because the authorities did not provide an equal playing field and had their own politics.

I am pitching my brand very high. Sri Lankans may not understand my concept. The trend today is that people are buying on impulse. It is about identifying good quality clothing made to high standards, it is similar to purchasing a diamond. But Sri Lanka has not understood this concept, because we are trying to give a diamond at a nominal price. It is not just about how much you spend, but it is also about how you buy a garment. That is our journey.

> **Success Has Come To Us At Various Stages. We Must Thank Our Parents For Everything Because It Is They Who Gave Us This Business. We Grew Step By Step And It Has Been Really Amazing.**

You took up this challenge when you were very young and built this up in the midst of challenges. What can you tell us about this experience?
I must thank my parents for that. During my school days my mother always said that if you get into a fight and get beaten, let them beat you but don’t hit back. At the time I started doing business, I went through a hard time. The 1983 riots and thereafter the conflict were very challenging periods for us. There were days when we didn’t know whether we would live to see the next day or make the payment next day to the bank. We used to purchase on credit and had to pay back by cheque.

The customer is our biggest strength. It was not always about how much money we made. We always focused on making the customer happy. Unlike today, we didn’t advertise in those days; it was always through word of mouth. Every customer that came in was personally attended to by me or our wonderful staff and that is how we

developed our customer base. Without even realising we expanded. We were invited to open stores in certain locations. I remember Crescat gave us the front store free of charge for one year because at that time no one wanted to go to Crescat owing to security threats. I still remember the day we were asked to open the store; and I wondered why, it was because people respected us.

I will not say that we are 100 per cent perfect though. I take criticism positively and see that I make the best product. But my staff at times cannot manage certain tasks, and that is where we are struggling. We are training them; and we are in the process of upgrading our second level team as well.

> **The Customer Is Our Biggest Strength. It Was Not Always About How Much Money We Made. We Always Focused On Making The Customer Happy. Unlike Today, We Didn't Advertise In Those Days; It Was Always Through Word Of Mouth. Every Customer That Came In Was Personally Attended To By Me Or Our Wonderful Staff And That Is How We Developed Our Customer Base.**

Your parents would have been proud of your achievements. You may have not expected Hameedia to come to this level. What can you tell us about this?

There are six in my family. At the time I took over the business my brother was managing it. We were brought up as a united family and our parents had taught us to share. My brother had big plans and he wanted to open factories. Then he moved away from the business. I never wanted to get into business because I knew this could not survive with six people. It was hand to mouth type of business at that time. I had a passion for design though and wanted to become a designer. I started focusing my life on that. I am happy that knowingly or unknowingly everything happened this way.

As our parents used to say, we must always think of how we can help others. It is not how much money we make, rather it is how we make it. My mother always used to say that we must not do wrong, negative or illegal things. We have tried our best to work straight and play straight. Our parents taught us good policies. They taught

us to share with others. It has become part of our family; part of our culture. The training that I got from my parents was more than any degree. The formulas we practice come naturally to me. That has helped us to be where we are.

Hameedia remains a family company. How did you manage to transform the company into one that has expanded overseas?
It is because of the foundation that was laid by our parents. They taught us to be united. Unity is very important. My mother always said that the main thing we can do after her demise is to be happy and united until we are alive. At home we were always taught to share and help others.

Today most family businesses split after the first or second generation; 90 per cent of family businesses do not survive in the second generation. Hameedia is now in the third generation. My daughter is working with us. My brother's children are also joining us. It is a very unique situation. When I wonder why, I realised that I have to set an example. I don't take advantage. I like to see everything done according to a system. I don't look into how much I get. I don't care about that. My younger brother Hussain Sadique overlooks administration and finance, while I manage the design, marketing and development side of the business. My elder brother is more a team player who guides us. Elder brothers always try to control us and it is very difficult if we don't give in. Sometimes workers say that it is difficult to work in a family business. Yes there are times. But that happens when both start fighting. We don't fight. We have different opinions and there are times I concede to his way. But I explain to him later. As long as it is among us, it is fine. Family businesses are divided because of such things. I have seen many family businesses this way, and I feel sorry for them. In my case, if my brother buys an apartment, he buys me a better apartment. If he buys a car, he buys a better car for me. Not that I want a better car, but he buys it anyway.

The next generation of your family is coming into the business. How do you plan to sustain Hameedia? What's the future of Hameedia?
The future is going to be tough for everyone and they have to work hard. The children of the present generation are very smart; every child is smart now. We think only our child is smart. But it is not so. I have seen that there are moments that a student who has completed his higher studies overseas spending a massive amount of money may return to the country and talk of something that will not work

here. However, there may be a student who has an Advanced Level qualification and a basic degree from Sri Lanka, who will be more aggressive and practical. Every parent has a dream that their children will be the best. I believe that anyone who is good has to be given an opportunity.

We are expanding. We recently opened a factory in Eravur in Batticaloa. We will be opening two more factories in the East, that is in Trincomalee, and Sampur. We feel we can help the underprivileged in these areas. Big family businesses are successful when their children get involved in different sectors in the business. The children are being trained in different areas, as all can't do finance, and all can't do fashion designing. In a big family business, you need each person to go into different areas. Overall, everyone in the family are excited about what we are doing at Hameedias. My children are living in Canada. My elder daughter has returned to Sri Lanka while the other two are still studying in Canada. They are excited about the many new things that we are doing, especially the fashion shows. They know that we have worked hard for them. And they feel that Hameedia is one place they can always come back to.

> **In Our Business We Never Received Training From Anywhere. We Had To Make Mistakes To Learn…We Were Self-Taught.**

You have made a name for men's clothing. There are many brands that have tried to follow Hameedia, but they have not been successful or they were not able to reach your level. How did you manage to maintain the name?

We watch our international competitors more than the local competitors. I hardly have time to look at local competitors. There are many in this sector today. We have always been ahead of competitors and must thank God for all we have achieved thus far because we are engaged in the business genuinely. God helps when your heart is good. We feel that everyone must live, everyone must be happy, and everyone must eat and survive in life. We are not greedy, but in busines, we work hard. We see great potential in the customer.

People must not try to overexpand and as a result fall. We don't do that; we develop step by step. We open one shop at a time. And, when you take one step at a time,

you know your limits. You know your direction, with that we upgraded ourselves, the product and motivated the staff. I undergo stress, but I enjoy my stress because I workout and run every day. I am a workaholic.

In our business, we never received training from anywhere. We had to make mistakes to learn. Today's generation has many institutions to guide them. Everything is available today to be perfect. We were self-taught.

Most of the blue chips are also getting into retail. You have managed to focus on one area and be successful. Many have opted out because they could not compete, but you have persevered.

We survived through fair play. For me it's not about the money but doing what I know and wanting it to be world class. I don't want to be only in Sri Lanka. My target is the world, to be in different parts of the world. I am building on that. At the moment, we have a Chinese national training my staff. Some of the employees will leave eventually, but I can't stop them. Yet I am happy for them. I want to train as many people as possible so that they learn about this trade.

Envoy London has become an international brand. I work as a designer for the Mr England contest. I ask myself how I got to work as a designer for the Mr England contest. For the last three years all 20 contestants have come under me. That reflects the standard of our company. We are a unique company, because we can do anything in 24 hours. I have a fantastic factory to do small quantities. We have the Signature brand for the mass market, Le Bond for the mid up-market, Envoy for the premium market and FH for the fashion and luxury range, we have everything that a man wants. Going international is not an issue. But setting up in another country requires investment, but the best thing is we have got the product right, that is what matters. We will give value for money, and give an edge to the consumer. With all the competition we have grown. Last year, we had a drop in performance, but we have overcome these challenges. We make mistakes, but we always bounce back.

Overall I am happy because our success is due to our staff. We have always been a company that maintains fair play when it comes to our staff. Most of my staff members have grown with me. They are part of the family.

Like me, there are hundreds of people who have been successful, but some of them have given up due to various obstacles. Business Today Passionate can highlight and provide exposure to such people. It is the duty of the country to bring them forward, send them overseas for exhibitions and training. Then we will see greater vibrancy in the industry.