

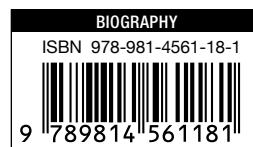


Award-winning television actress and host, Belinda Lee, travels the world in the course of her work. Along the way the bilingual thespian meets many inspiring individuals who are larger than life, not only because they have the heart of giants, but because they have risen above the things that could have weighed them down — poverty, timidity, disability — in order to fulfill their life's purpose.

This collection of heart-warming stories introduces readers to some of the amazing people she meets on her travels — people who celebrate the human spirit and restore your faith in the good of humanity.

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BELINDA LEE

*LARGER
than life*

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LARGER *than life*

celebrating the human spirit



BELINDA LEE

with JULEEN SHAW

For Review only

In praise of *Larger than Life*

As Singapore celebrates 50 years of independence, we also celebrate Singaporeans who have left their comfortable homes and ventured into uncharted territories that most of us will not even think of visiting. Their unconditional love shines through like sunlight on a cold, winter day and deserves our respect, admiration and support.

In *Larger than Life: Celebrating the Human Spirit*, we catch a rare glimpse of behind the scenes and first-hand accounts of these stories as told by Belinda herself. I hope you will enjoy this book. Thank you, Belinda, and the production team for bringing all these heart-warming stories to us.

— Lucas Chow

Chairman, Health Promotion Board

Belinda shares heart-warming stories of remarkable people who have made the leap of faith to answer their life's calling. It is inspiring to read how they sacrificed creature comforts and material wealth, yet gained a richness beyond what the 5Cs can reap. And that's simply by making a positive impact on another person's life.

— Georgina Chang

Head, The Celebrity Agency

Sometimes we take things for granted, and many times, especially in developing countries, we think we are the ones who are being giving. In reality, it is other people whose touching stories enlighten and redefine us. Through the eyes of Belinda, you realise that the most valuable things in life aren't things and we can all make a difference for a better, loving world. This book will expand your capacity to love, to dream, to endure and to find peace in all circumstances. If you don't receive a miracle, you can still be a miracle for someone else.

— Ignatius Ho

Vice-President, Life Without Limbs, Greater China

Larger Than Life will give anyone a wake-up call and a different perspective on the really important things in life, especially for those who are too involved in the rat race. Priorities will be explored and nagging questions will be raised about modern-day society and how far we have come, or have we? Singapore's most beloved travel host, Belinda Lee, is not afraid to get her hands dirty and dives headfirst into unimaginable places. The result is a heartfelt read from start to finish. Bravo!

— Leon Jay Williams

Regional Artiste

Belinda has always been very compassionate and she has finally found a bridge that connects her true personality to her work and it connects with her audience. It's one thing to see her visit these amazing countries and share the different human emotions from the strength to the joy on television, but to have it in print is just another beautiful extension. Books are food for the soul and in this particular one Belinda speaks for the people and places she's seen and they are able to tell their stories through her.

— Utt Panichkul
Regional Artiste/Entrepreneur

For over a decade, the Belinda I know has consistently demonstrated a profound love, compassion and selflessness for those dear to her and even strangers in remote corners of the world. She is always the first to extend a helping hand to those in need and the last to leave in one's personal crisis. Ever since she was little, Belinda has gone through painful experiences that have shaped the woman she is today – a global humanitarian and a community champion whose life mission is to fulfill greater causes than her own. To me, *Larger Than Life* lays bare the core tenets of her soul and is a true reflection of the strength, resilience, and enormous capacity present in one remarkable person. Only one who has experienced life at the darkest depths can turn her mourning into dancing, find the strength to carry others on tenacious shoulders, and bear their weight on calloused but truly beautiful soles.

— Anne Ng
Corporate Communications Manager, Lagardère Sports

Belinda and I have traveled the world together sharing deeply profound thoughts and experiences but none have transformed her quite like the ones in this book. I was delightfully surprised to discover that the best part of her travels were intangible. These reflections are for anyone who has ever wanted to develop a deeper compassion for humanity and discover parts of themselves in the big, wide world.

— Donita Rose
Regional Artiste

Larger than Life shows that although life can begin with suffering, it should not end so. The overcoming of suffering can be the light and hope of many as there is no better way to thank God than to have compassion and to lend a hand to someone in the dark. This unselfish effort can be the beginning of a fuller life for ourselves.

— Shirley Tan
Chief Executive Officer, Rajawali Property Group

LARGER *than life*

For Review only

LARGER *than life*

celebrating the human spirit

BELINDA LEE

with JULEEN SHAW

For Review only

dedication

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To God.
And to you, dear reader, who are searching for greater meaning in life.
You are made for greatness.





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foreword

by Elim Chew

People have always needed to hear stories — good stories that uplift us especially in busy times when stress can be overwhelming, and inspiring stories that encourage us to keep going even when the going gets tough.

For that reason, Belinda's stories are a welcome source of nourishment for our soul.

The Singaporeans whom Belinda introduces us to in *Larger than Life* are trailblazers, living in unique environments and pursuing unusual passions. They are inspiring individuals in their selflessness, their bold perspectives and their courage in taking the road less travelled.

No matter what their stories, they cause us to reflect on our own lives, touch our hearts and add positivity to our vision.

Belinda's strength is her soft and warm heart, which makes her the right person to share the reflections and values that echo in every tale.

I hope you will be inspired by this book and, better still, go on to inspire others.

After watching the TV series *Find Me a Singaporean*, Belinda connected me to Lester, the awe-inspiring Little Honey Man and somehow, we just clicked and became great friends.

One thing led to another and suddenly I was on a plane buzzing to Rwanda and saw firsthand his social entrepreneurial work and his expansion plan. Gosh, am I bowled over by the work this man is doing and pleasantly befuddled to find out how small little things like bees can transform people's lives with Lester teaching villagers bee farming skills.

If this short description of The Honey Man piqued your curiosity, then you are sure to devour this book with gusto. Without revealing more so as not to let the insects out of the bag, go on, read this wonderful inspirational story as presented by Belinda.

Elim Chew
Founder, 77th Street

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introduction

When I was a little girl, I heard a story that stayed with me for the rest of my life. It went something like this.

One day a boy was walking at a waterfront when he was surprised to come across thousands of starfish washed up on a beach. Knowing that they would die if he did not get them back into the water, he began to pick them up one by one and ease them back into their watery home. A man came along and scoffed, “Why do you bother? It is impossible for you to save all of them!” The boy was undaunted. “I may not be able to save *all* the starfish,” he replied as he gently placed another starfish into the water. “But I saved this one!”

The simple story left a very deep impression on me when I was a little girl. While I aspired to be like the boy, I actually felt more like one of the starfish that was desperately but patiently waiting for some kind soul to take notice of me, to gently pick me up and hopefully take me back to a place of warmth and security.

During my school days, I was an introvert. I never took part in any school performances as my classmates told me that I was not talented enough. I suffered from low self-esteem, but it didn’t stop me from reaching out to those in need even at a young age. I remember an occasion when I walked

home after school one day and saw an elderly man struggling with his bag of groceries. I went over to help him and offered to walk him home. I knew that I would get home late and be scolded by my mum. Yet, I followed my heart and did what I felt was right. The elderly man was so touched that he offered me a drink after I had walked him home. I politely declined and sped off. As I was running home, I felt a warm, tingling sensation. For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of joy and fulfillment. I felt useful. It was a good feeling that was new to me. I was 45 minutes late and, as expected, I was questioned for my lateness. I wanted to lie but didn't know how. Bursting into tears, I told my mum the truth. To my surprise, instead of reprimanding me, she just advised me to be careful when helping strangers.

At the age of 17 after I completed my 'O' Levels, I entered the workforce and did all kinds of odd jobs. In 1998 I plucked up the courage to join the MTV VJ Hunt. The competition was stiff and I was up against very good looking, eloquent and talented people. I felt that I was none of the above. My only saving grace was how big an MTV fan I was. Incredibly, I won the contest and became Singapore's first MTV VJ at the age of 21. I had no idea how I won. Later, the executive producers from MTV told me that I was chosen because of my bubbly personality and infectious laughter which was deemed genuine and refreshing in this superficial industry. "You are a breath of fresh air," the producer said.

After my four-year stint with MTV, I was invited to join Mediacorp, a local TV station. I was given the opportunity to host and act. It was exciting and new, but for some reason I felt that there was something I still had to fulfill in my life which I wasn't doing. This made me sad and a little empty and I considered giving up.

But in 2006, I received a call from my manager that would change my life. It was an offer to host a new travelogue: *Find Me A Singaporean*. This new programme turned my life around. For the first time, audiences saw a side of me that was fun, emotional, inquisitive and vulnerable — the real me. It changed my destiny as an artiste and, more importantly, as a person.

This show took me to far-flung places around the world to look for Singaporeans based overseas. Some gave up a comfortable life in Singapore to pursue their dreams or undertake humanitarian work overseas. They

left a very deep impression on my heart. They were ordinary people living extraordinary lives. They exposed me to a world that was filled with love, hope, compassion, meaning and purpose. They opened up my mind to look at life from a different perspective. They didn't need much to be happy. Their objective in life was to help people, especially those in need. Their world was simple, purposeful and unhampered by materialism.

I realised that it is a wonderful feeling to be the real me on television. I started to find meaning in what I did, as every episode that was shown left an impression on the viewers. I received hundreds of e-mails from viewers who poured their hearts out and told me how moved they were after watching the show. It made many of them ponder and reflect on their own lives. It motivated them to be better people and to help those in need.

A deep sense of joy, freedom and purpose was rekindled in me as I interviewed these profiles. My life was enriched, empowered and restored — the same feelings that I experienced when I was a little girl helping that old man. Because of the transformation that I experienced, I thought it would be selfish of me to keep all these amazing stories in my heart and not share them with the world. The stories transformed me and I believed that they will touch others too.

My mentor, Elim Chew, strongly encouraged me to write a book. I wanted to but I had my worries. I didn't know how and where to begin. But Elim told me, "Bel, you are larger than life. Your life is not just about you. It is about other people. Go out there and share their stories. You never know who you will touch."

Life is indeed not just about I, me and myself. We don't need to be a Bill Gates or Mother Teresa to save the whole world. All we need is a willing heart that is never too busy to stop for someone who desperately needs a bear hug or a listening ear. So here I present to you *Larger Than Life: Celebrating the Human Spirit!* It is certainly a dream come true and I sincerely hope that these heartwarming stories will bless you and uplift you, especially if what you are searching for is a purposeful life.

Belinda Lee



Hundreds of Indian street children — rescued, housed and fed by Singaporean Ravi Rai — enjoy a newfound family of "brothers and sisters" in Ravi's five orphanages. Shadowing and interviewing Ravi, the first profile in the *Find Me a Singaporean* series, was equal parts exhausting and exhilarating!

view only



india

RAVI: PAPA OF DISCARDED CHILDREN

The night was just beginning to cast an indigo glow over the dusty New Delhi street as I dragged a brand new suitcase behind me, wincing as it became less and less pristine each time it waded through a grey puddle or ambled over a suspicious patch of mud.

It was a chilly November evening in 2006 and my camera crew and I had just stepped off a flight from Singapore en route to Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. We were on a mission to find the Singaporean who would kick off the very first episode of the very first season of *Find Me A Singaporean*. What a thrill!

But anticipation quickly wilted into dismay when we discovered that we had missed the last train to Lucknow because of a massive traffic jam. No choice, we had to look for a decent place to spend the night.

Harried by the change of plans and the chaos of rickshaws, scooters, overhead wires, billboards, banners, street shops and milling people, we ducked into the first hotel we saw. Discrimination be damned.



It is estimated that there are 18 million street children in India, with 60,000 waifs abandoned every year.

Big mistake. When I trudged to my room, I discovered that the door had no lock, just a latch. The walls, originally a baby blue, had decayed to a vomit yellow. The mattress was hollow in the middle and the bedsheet decorated with hair. The shower? It was a hose with cold water.

Jialat, I thought. I'm in trouble!

And that was the start of my challenging journey as a travelogue host. "What on earth did you get yourself into, Bel?" I berated myself as I lay in the bed that was threatening to collapse. Too late — there was no turning back.

Fresh from the glamorous world of MTV VJ-ing and television acting, I had gamely accepted a new challenge: hosting travelogues.

A sense of adventure stirred within me at the novelty. But like a typical Singaporean, my secret hope was that the adventure would not get *too* uncomfortable.

Over the dozens of journeys I would go on to take, from Africa to the Arctic, from Myanmar to Mongolia, I would tackle phobias as I slept in a cemetery, I would scavenge in a dumpsite and stare down swarms of African killer bees. I would be hospitalised for food poisoning, treated for dengue and survive heartstopping dangers. Talk about uncomfortable!

But the real surprise was that this adventure would not only take me around the world, it would also take me on an inward journey of self-examination and self-discovery. I would be challenged, confronted, inspired, and ultimately transformed by the remarkable people I would meet over the next nine years.



My first interview for *Find Me a Singaporean* opened my eyes to the plight of India's vulnerable street children, many of whom fall into prostitution and drug use.

And Ravi Rai was the very first.

The streets of Lucknow were haphazard with ringing bicycles, harried pedestrians and wobbly three-wheeled carts piled high with canvas bags overflowing with cotton and vegetables. Traditionally a cultural and historical centre, Lucknow is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in all of India, and also the poorest.

The city seemed caught between tradition and modernity, with suits as common as *sarees*, and contemporary buildings alongside colonial arches.

I must have stopped to ask directions from at least a dozen cyclists and shopkeepers before a group of children recognised Ravi's name and gesticulated excitedly for me to follow them. How telling that the children were the ones who knew Ravi — after all, these youngsters were the very reason Ravi had left Singapore to make a new life in India.

Helpfully pushing and pulling my suitcase, the chattering children led me through an open gate into a field that was bare except for a small huddle of plastic chairs under the shade of a spreading tree.

Perched on the chairs was a fascinating array of children dressed in a motley mismatch of shirts and sweaters and hats, chatting animatedly with a dashing Indian gentleman in their midst.

For Review only

That was the first time I came face to face with Ravi, then 43, the Singaporean who to this day I call my hero.

“Belinda,” Ravi greeted with an amiable smile as he rose from his chair.

“Ravi!” I exclaimed, hugely relieved at finally finding this man we had travelled over 4,000km by plane, train and on foot to meet. “Are these your children?”

“These are all my children,” he replied with a laugh.

And indeed they were — dozens upon dozens of children, from toddlers to teens, rescued from streets and railway stations where they had been abandoned and discarded.

At that time, Ravi had already set up three homes — places where the children were provided with food, shelter, education, medical care, a stable routine, and more importantly, a family of brothers, sisters and parental figures.

Today, Ravi’s Singapore-registered non-governmental organisation (NGO) CoME, or Children of Mother Earth, runs five homes housing some 200 children in Delhi, Lucknow and Gorakhpur in the central northern region of India.

Three of the homes are located in old, disused buildings donated by the Indian railway authorities in support of Ravi’s work with the homeless. A medical camp runs on weekends for those who live and work around the railway station: the children, the beggars and the rickshaw pullers.

It is estimated that 18 million street children throng India, with 60,000 children abandoned every year. Without a social safety net, these vulnerable children have very little hope for a stable future. Some are orphans. Others are runaways who have fled a life of abuse.



The children are happiest when Papa Ravi comes home to them.

Yet others have been sold into child labour or the sex trade by their own desperate parents.

Many fall into prostitution and drug use — whitener mostly, hashish if they could afford it.

Ravi developed a routine of taking to the streets and railway stations where many homeless children lived to befriend them and gain their trust.

When CoME began operations, Ravi had asked the rescued children to come up with a name for the orphanage.

“*Apna Ghar*” came the unanimous reply. As homeless children who’d never had an address, being able to say they lived in *Apna Ghar*, Hindi for *Our Home*, gave them a wondrous and welcome sense of belonging at last.

The tale of how Ravi came to become Papa to hundreds of lost children is quite extraordinary.

Ravi was nine years old when he first visited his ancestral village of Pharsar in the district of Gorakhpur, India. His father and paternal ancestors had their roots in Gorakhpur. His mother was Singaporean, which was how he came to be born and raised in Owen Road, Singapore, the fourth sibling among three brothers and five sisters.

The family was relatively well off, with Ravi’s father running a small transport company.

In the Rai family, there was a curious tradition. Whenever the children turned eight or nine, their father would whisk them away to visit his hometown of Gorakhpur.



Top: *Apna Ghar*, Hindi for *Our Home*, has given the children a sense of belonging.

Centre & bottom: Homeless families are a common sight. This boy living at the railway station shows me how he sniffs glue to numb himself to a life of danger and despair.

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A joyful birthday celebration — every rescued child is given a proper name and birth date.

So when young Ravi was nine, he set foot in India for the first time, little knowing that it would be far from his last.

“We drove through the village in our car, a black Ambassador, to our family home which my father had built with his earnings from Singapore,” recalled Ravi. “At that time, early 1970s, few people in the village could afford a car. There were only two or three Ambassadors in the entire region! So as we drove to our home, curious village children came running alongside the car, trying to touch it.

“I asked my father, ‘*Babuji*, who are these children?’

“They are poor people from a low caste.”

“What is caste?” Ravi countered. Growing up in Singapore, he had never come across the concept.

“My father told me that the village was segregated into areas for upper caste and lower caste people,” said Ravi. “If you were walking along a road, a lower caste person would stand aside for the upper caste person to pass. This is the case even now in the rural parts of India. A social system that has been passed down for thousands of years takes time to change.

“When we arrived at our home, the children stopped at the gate, staring at us. The moment my father called out to them, they ran away. It was clear that they were scared of us, thinking, ‘Why are these upper caste people calling us? We must have made a mistake and they are going to beat us!’

“I heard our driver, who was from the village, say to my father, ‘Don’t have anything to do with them! They are dirty people, they will steal your

things!’ That was how the villagers thought. But my father stayed silent. “Later on he told me quietly, ‘They are not bad people. They steal because they don’t have enough to eat. They are poor because they don’t have land. They beat their wives because they are not educated.’

“*Babuji* was an open, kind hearted man. In Singapore, he would help new immigrants from India to find jobs. And even when they had secured jobs, he would push \$50 into their hands to tide them over until they received their first month’s salary. He would call it a loan, but he never accepted payment. My mother was equally generous. She never worked. Well, she had eight children to raise, that was work! But she was always kind to the new immigrants, giving them food, clothes and even our own family possessions like watches. So I learnt compassion from my parents.”

To Ravi’s delight, his father encouraged him to go to the village to visit the children the next day.

“The children would not come to me, so I went to them,” said Ravi, his deep-set eyes twinkling. “I played with them and saw how they lived. A pair of slippers was not even in their dreams. Even the adults could not afford any footwear. If they had a shirt to wear in winter, it was considered plenty.

“They slept on sacks of husks from harvested rice. During winter, if it was very cold, they would pile the husks up into a little hill and burrow inside to stay warm. Those who were lucky enough to have homes, cooked and slept in a single room. The whole family — grandfather, grandmother, parents, children — lived in one room, and the goat would be sleeping in one corner and suddenly a hen would fly across the room! It was eye-opening for me.”

The memory of the barefoot children who had become his friends and the abject poverty of the villagers never left Ravi’s mind, even when he returned to Singapore.

After graduating from university, Ravi earned a good living as a civil engineer in Singapore, and he worked with only one thought in mind: to save money for India. It was the children who had first made an impact on

For Review only

him, and he decided that the children would be the ones he would dedicate his life to helping.

“The poverty cycle has to be broken through the children,” Ravi said resolutely. “When parents are not educated, they don’t have enough money to educate their children who can’t get stable jobs when they grow up, and the cycle continues. So if you want to break the poverty cycle, you educate the children, then the life of this generation will improve and then the next generation, and the next generation.”

In 1998, Ravi withdrew his life savings of \$300,000 and moved into his ancestral home in Gorakhpur, building a second storey and throwing open its doors as an orphanage.

The first child to arrive was an abandoned one-day-old baby. Next came two five- and six-year-old orphans, a brother and sister, whose father had died in the city years ago and whose mother had recently died in childbirth.

Week after week, he found street children who needed a home. With the help of his sister and local villagers whom he hired as cooks and caregivers, Ravi saw the numbers in the orphanage quickly grow.

“At first the neighbours thought it was a joke when I said I was opening up my home to homeless children,” Ravi said with amusement. “When they realised I was serious, they became horrified and said, ‘Oh my God, he is going to make our neighbourhood into a low-caste area!’ But after awhile, when they saw my passion for their community, they changed their view and accepted the orphanage.”



Left: A homeless boy and his pet goat. Right: In 1998, Ravi withdrew his life's savings and moved into his ancestral home in Gorakhpur, throwing open its doors as an orphanage.

Today that one-day-old baby is a well adjusted 14 year old who is enrolled in public school. The siblings have also grown up — the boy has a job in Bombay and the girl recently sat for her ‘A’ level exams.



Wu tiao jian de ai, unconditional love. Ravi embodied that phrase for me, with his extraordinary commitment and sacrifice.

Some of the children Ravi has rescued over the past 17 years have grown up, married and had children of their own, making Ravi a proud “grandpa” of seven.

“Do you ever get lonely? Don’t you want to fall in love?” I asked him curiously.

“Sometimes I am a bit lonely,” Ravi confessed. “But when I think of my children and how much love they have given me, I feel that I lack nothing. It seems like I am sacrificing but actually I am the one who is gaining a lot from my children.”

To illustrate, he told me the stories of two children who have made an impact on him.

Shanti was just seven years old when her prostitute mother was murdered. Together with her mother, her five-year-old brother and her two-year-old sister, they had lived under some plastic sheeting near the railway station. She had never met her father. Her routine every day was to pick garbage and rags from the streets to sell, or earn money from small chores in the neighbourhood.

As she was returning one day from earning a little money as a sweeper, an acquaintance hurried over to tell her that her mother had been beaten up by gangsters. Panicked, she rushed to her mother, whom she found lying in a pool of blood.

The small girl dragged her mother to the road where she managed to persuade a rickshaw rider to take them to the hospital. In desperation Shanti went from one hospital to another, with her mother bleeding out in the

rickshaw and her frightened siblings in her arms. Nobody wanted to treat a homeless woman.

Finally, a government hospital staff consented to bandage her mother up before sending them packing. They limped home and the next morning her mother was still alive, although barely. With a few coins she managed to dig up, she bought a cup of tea and bread for her mother. But before the day was up, her mother had died.

What was she to do? The grim skies had opened up and rain was lashing down. With the help of a neighbour she managed to dig a shallow grave and bury her mother in the storm.

Eventually neighbours referred her to Ravi, who took her and her siblings in without hesitation.

“We complain so much about life’s little inconveniences,” said Ravi. “But here was a courageous little girl who had faced so much at such a young age. Today she is a 14 year old who can still smile after all that she has gone through. What do we have to complain about?”

Mohan is another child who has made a lasting impression on Ravi.

The five-year-old boy lived in a village where thousands were dying from mosquito-borne Japanese Encephalitis, a brain fever.

He was from an impoverished, single-parent family whom Ravi had befriended. When Ravi heard that the small boy had contracted the disease, he had travelled to Mohan’s village to try and get him medical help.

All the private nursing homes were packed to capacity and, in 2003, did not have the medication to treat Mohan. Using his influence and promising to bring his own bed, Ravi managed to get Mohan admitted to a medical facility. There, the doctor had told Ravi that within the next 48 hours Mohan would either pull through or die.

“Up until that point, I did not believe in the act of surrendering,” Ravi said quietly. “I was an engineer, used to setting deadlines and making projects happen. But that night I prayed for Mohan and surrendered his fate to God. That was a turning point in my life — I began to believe in the value of surrendering.”

Against all odds, Mohan survived and has grown into a fine young man. Last year, he sat for his ‘O’ level examinations.

Sadly, not all of Ravi’s children make it.

When I first met Ravi in Lucknow, a little boy who hardly reached up to my waist stepped forward and surprised me with a crushing bear hug.

Ten-year-old Anubhav had dark, coarse, patchy skin. When Ravi had rescued Anubhav from the railway station and taken him to the home, the other children had ostracised him because he looked different and did not speak, instead making peculiar, unintelligible noises. In time, with the help of the adults at the home, Anubhav learnt to communicate using language and to socialise with his peers.

During my time at Apnar Ghar, Anubhav soon became my favourite. He was sweet tempered, generous with his affection, and thoughtful, constantly asking me if I had eaten. I remember he was the first one to hug me when I arrived and the last one to hug me when I left.

A few months after the filming, when I was back in Singapore, I heard to my sorrow that Anubhav had passed away.

Ravi had been in London for a training programme when he heard that Anubhav had taken ill and had been hospitalised. Rushing back to India, Ravi spent Anubhav’s last 10 days with him in the hospital, bringing him his favourite *chapatti*. In the end Anubhav died in his Papa’s arms. I believe Ravi took a long time to come to terms with gentle Anubhav’s death.



Mohan, who as a child was struck by the deadly Japanese Encephalitis, survived against all odds and recently sat for his 'O' level examinations.

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Anubhav (in blue), my favourite child, spent his last days in the arms of Papa Ravi.

There is something very heartwarming about watching a loving father interact with his children in ordinary ways: a joke shared, a rowdy ball game played, a grave exchange when the child misbehaves. That was the way it was with Ravi and his children.

Each morning he would wake up at 5 or 6am together with his school-going children. The teacher he had hired took pains to spend two to three months preparing these illiterate street children to handle the rigours of academia. Up to 98% of his children are enrolled in mainstream

schools. Many go on to take their 'O' and 'A' level examinations.

After a breakfast of *chapatti* and milk, there would be a flurry in the kitchen as 40 to 50 school lunches of fried rice or *paratha* were packed for the children to take to school. When it was time for his children to troop off to school, Ravi would send them off with a wave, saying what he said every day, "Happy Earth!"

I watched as four primary-school aged children clambered into an ingenious rickshaw-bus which would take them to school — a cylindrical tin-roofed contraption with benches on either side to fit six small children. It was pulled by a bicycle pedalled by a hardy male staff member.

You would never guess that these children, dressed in smart uniforms with hair neatly combed, were not too long ago wandering barefoot in the streets, their hair matted and their feet stiff with dirt.

When they returned in the afternoon, Papa would be there to greet them and go over their daily school reports, helping them with their weak subjects if necessary. Older children who had problems would steal a few moments to seek Papa out for a listening ear.

When homework was done, Papa would lead the way to the open field armed with cricket bats, marbles, or soccer balls. *Gulli-danda*, a traditional stick and ball game, was a favourite among the children.

Such simple pleasures — and yet so significant to these children who, until life in Ravi's home, had passed their days begging, picking garbage or staying alert in order to escape being waylaid, beaten, or worse.

"When they were living in the streets they went hungry, they went thirsty, they were unable to sleep properly — that is the life of street children," Ravi told me.

Long after they fell asleep in their airy dorms of six to eight beds, Ravi would walk from one room to another, looking on with satisfaction as his children slept peacefully. Occasionally he would find a child tossing and turning, or staring into the darkness, unable to sleep. This troubled him.

"In the beginning I thought that helping the children get a good education was enough. But these children have seen a lot of trauma in their lives," Ravi mused, "things that give them nightmares or make them afraid to close their eyes."

Realising that some of his children needed emotional help, Ravi worked with international counsellors to learn how to help his children come to terms with past hurts.

All of his children's needs — physical, emotional, social, educational and vocational — were considered. He even took it upon himself to find spouses for the children who had grown to marriageable age.



Left: Mealtimes are a noisy and happy affair. Right: After school, some of Ravi's children accompany him to the railway station to persuade street urchins to seek food, shelter and medical aid at the orphanage.



Girls are especially vulnerable on the streets. Once in Ravi's orphanage, they have the opportunity to grow into educated and confident young women.

Sheetal was one such child. She had been a young orphan girl found begging at a temple near the railway station. When the police had brought her to Ravi, she had had a two-year-old brother, Jeetu, in tow. After two days, when she trusted the adults enough to open up, she had revealed that another brother, Chintu, aged five, had run away when the police had “caught” her. She was worried sick about Chintu. The next day, Ravi returned to the temple with Sheetal and after much searching, they found a traumatised Chintu hiding in a pig sty. The three siblings were reunited and 11 years later, an elated Ravi gave Sheetal away as a beautiful bride, playing the role of her father at the wedding ceremony.

“The one thing that left a deep impression on me was how happy his children were,” my producer Tay Siang Hui commented. “When Ravi stepped into the house, you saw, heard and felt the genuine laughter in his children’s hearts. Their laughter rippled through the entire compound and I found myself smiling along with them.”

So strong was the impact Ravi had on Siang Hui, in fact, that she made a return visit to India to film a feature documentary on the children living and working around the railway tracks.

It was during that visit that Siang Hui accompanied Ravi on a search.

Ravi had a boy in his home who wished to be reunited with his family. The boy did not remember the name of his village nor the trains he had taken

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when he had run away. It seemed like an impossible task to locate the boy’s village, but Ravi was determined to reunite the boy with his family.

“With every lead he had, Ravi made trips across the country, sometimes commuting on trains for hours,” Siang Hui recalled. “I was fortunate enough to be there when he made the final trip to send this boy home to his family.

“The mother’s joy at seeing her son again was unforgettable. What broke me was the goodbye between the boy and Ravi, who had been like a father to him. For me to witness Ravi selflessly giving back the son he had rescued, cared for and healed, broke my heart. I saw the pain in his eyes, leaving his child. He did not pretend to be strong, nor did he cry. He commuted home and proceeded to care for all the other children who jumped on him the moment he came back.



Looking at their blithe smiles and merry faces, you would not imagine that these children had not too long ago been destitute and desperate.

“In his love, there is often pain. In this pain,
Ravi found even more love to give.”

Ravi took me with him one day on one of his visits to the local railway station. Women in soiled *sarees* slept on the concrete floor as indifferent commuters hurried past. Wild dogs nosed around bodies passed out on the platform. A mound of dirty blankets hid a small child.

That day, Ravi convinced a young boy who looked no older than 11 to return with us to the home. The malnourished, barefoot fellow had no friends, no family, no possessions. He smelt like a pungent blend of garbage, perspiration and excrement.

But Ravi did not seem to notice any of these things. He bent his head close to the boy to listen whenever he spoke and looked at him with a kindly gaze. It was clear that the sorry child he saw before him was not a tattered creature but one who, cleaned up and educated, could become a fine citizen.

Yet this boy, like many, eventually ran back to the railway station after being fed.

Of all Ravi's challenges, the most painful was watching his rescued children return to the streets.

Ravi invested months, even years, to befriend a child and convince him or her to start life anew in one of his homes, only to see the child scamper back to the streets in a matter of days.

“They are used to living in the streets and they feel that they are doing okay, earning enough money from begging to get food, watch a movie or buy glue to sniff,” Ravi said without judgement. “By the age of 14 or 15 they often become delinquent or join street gangs. After awhile when they are hungry, they come back again. We have found that on average these children run away from our home three times before they return to stay.”

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“How do you deal with the disappointment?” I asked.

“It's not easy,” he confessed. “You work very hard for someone and at the end of the day they return to the streets. In the beginning the staff and I did get disappointed. But now we are used to it. The children have taught us how to work with no expectations.”

Ravi travels by train to one of his five homes every few days, foregoing a comfortable coach for a non-air-conditioned one because “the savings of 500 rupees can buy about 40kg of wheat which can last two or three days in one of the homes”.

Eight months out of a year, when it is not too cold, he drags a simple cot outdoors, sets up a mosquito net and sleeps under the stars.

From the rental proceeds of his three-room HDB flat in Clementi, he keeps CoME afloat, together with support from sponsors.

“When you tell people you are from Singapore, they have respect for you and know that you are not just in the country to make a quick buck,” he said. “Whenever I need to meet an official in India, I always mention Singapore and that gets me appointments easily!”

Up until then, I had never met anyone who has made such a deep and palpable impact on the lives of so many. Being a handsome and eligible engineer, Ravi had attracted the attention of many a well-to-do family who had approached his parents in the hope of arranging an auspicious marriage.

With bluntness, he had told his parents that he meant to dedicate his life to the street children in India. It was not fair to demand the same dedication of a wife and children, he told them. After barely a moment's hesitation, his parents had given him their blessing. With that, Ravi had given up every comfort he was born with to live among the poorest of the poor.



A young boy living at the railway station is persuaded to seek shelter at the orphanage. But like many others, he eventually chooses to return to life on the streets.

People often say, “What can one person do?”

I asked Ravi the same question when I saw scores of homeless people begging at railway platforms and barefoot children wandering aimlessly in the streets. There were just so many open mouths and needy palms.

“Yes,” he replied serenely, “there *are* so many who need help. But that can’t be an excuse not to help them. I do what it is within my capacity to do. And I have found that when you have good intentions with no hidden agenda, help will come.”

Ravi gave me a precious glimpse into the heart of a genuine humanitarian and made me realise how incredibly much one ordinary person can do.

On our second to last day of filming, our cameraman requested that Ravi and his children wake up at 5am the next day in order for us to make the most of the buttery dawn sunlight.

I said to the children, “Tomorrow morning we are going to wake up at 5 o’clock, and we’re going out to the field to film you walking. Is that alright?”

“Ye-e-e-s!” dozens of childish voices rang out.

The next morning, the children popped out of bed with excitement. With their friends, they streamed out of the home into the nearby field of wild mustard flowers. Ravi led the way and his children belted out a cheerful Hindi song as they waded through the sea of yellow flowers waving in the wind.

The chilly dawn air was redolent of flowers. As I breathed in the freshness, I felt like I was breathing in an air of irrepressible hope.

It was not just Ravi who touched me, but his children too. They all had shocking stories. They all had been dealt a tough hand in life. Yet not once did I hear them complain, sulk or wallow in self pity. The simple optimism and genuine eagerness with which they took each day underscored for me the robust power of hope.

“I have found that when you have good intentions with no hidden agenda, help will come.”

Nine years later...

I heard from Ravi just weeks after the devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal on April 25th 2015, taking more than 8,600 lives.

Before the reverberations even settled, Ravi took to the road, travelling some 10 hours by car from India to Nepal with a few of his older teenaged children, braving strong aftershocks on perilous mountain roads in order to render help to the Nepali people.

He had done the same after the Gujarat earthquake in 2002. The thought of children who needed help drove him to reach out with whatever resources he could muster.

Travelling to the Nepalese village of Cougaon, in a mountainous region badly affected by the quake, Ravi put his old engineering skills to use. Together with the Nepali villagers and his children, he built a schoolhouse measuring 7m by 5m from iron pipes and galvanized iron sheets.

That schoolhouse became a shelter for 150 to 200 children between the ages of five and 12. With contributions from well wishers, he bought toys and educational materials for the school from Nepali shopkeepers.

Dawn breaks over a field of mustard flowers as the children congregate for a last group photo. My producer, Siang Hui (right, wearing spectacles), subsequently returned to film Ravi.



It has been almost a decade since I first met Ravi. Evidently, time has not slowed down his drive or blunted his compassion. He continues to role model for his children the imperative of helping those who need help the most.

Street children in India possess nothing, not even a name. It is believed that up to 60% of India does not have birth registration. Whenever Ravi succeeds in rescuing a child, the first thing he does is to urge the child to pick a name.

“Some of them take the opportunity to choose names of Bollywood stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai,” chuckles Ravi. The names are registered with the authorities and each child is presented with an identity card and bank account emblazoned with his or her new name.



Building a schoolhouse for the Nepali children in Cougaon, Nepal, with the help of villagers after the devastating April 2015 earthquake.

“When the children have self esteem, they are less likely to return to a life of begging or prostitution,” Ravi said.

No matter the choice of first name, each child of Ravi’s also takes on the same surname: Manas, Hindi for *human*. Two years ago, Ravi changed his own surname from Rai — a name well respected in the Indian community — to Manas. It was a gesture that said: We are family.

Like the children, after meeting Ravi I felt as though I had a new identity. One that involved eyes that saw with greater clarity, ears that listened without judgement and feet that hurried a little faster to help someone in pain.

I left India a different person from the one I had been when I’d first arrived.

“Their simple optimism and genuine eagerness underscored for me the robust power of hope.”



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about belinda lee



Attractive and bubbly, Belinda was the first Singaporean to become an MTV VJ in 1998 after winning over the producers in a regional talent scouting competition. During her five years at MTV, her show *MTV Kan Yi Kan* won the Best Magazine Entertainment Programme at the Asian Television Awards in 1999, sealing her reputation as a quick-witted and entertaining television host.

Her career at MediaCorp Studios began when she joined the company as a host. But she soon broadened her

artistic skills by trying her hand at acting. She caught viewers' attention in her debut drama serial *Room In My Heart*, convincingly playing the dual roles of a teenage rebel and a goody-two-shoes turned KTV hostess. She also acted as a long-suffering wife of a former gangster in *Soup of Life* and a hypochondriac in Singapore's longest drama *Your Hand In Mine*.


Versatile and effectively bilingual, Belinda hosted Channel NewsAsia's current affairs programme *Show Me the Money* and won the Best Info-ed Host award at the 2009 Star Awards for the reality dance show *Come Dance with Me*. She also hosted popular info-tainment shows *RenovAID* and *The Places We Live In*.

The effervescent host especially touched viewers with her long-running travelogue *Find Me A Singaporean*, where she went in search of Singaporeans abroad, some of whom were bettering the lives of others. Currently in its fourth season, *Find Me a Singaporean* won Belinda the Best Info-ed Host award at the 2013 Star Awards.


Belinda is a household name among television viewers, having been consecutively voted MediaCorp's Top 10 Most Popular Female Artistes from 2013 – 2015.

Her current appointment as World Vision SG Ambassador reinforces her popularity as a socially conscious celebrity who is both relatable and caring.

If you would like connect with Belinda, you can do so on these platforms:

 E-mail: emailbelinda@belinda-lee.com

 Instagram: [leebelinda](https://www.instagram.com/leebelinda)

 Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/belindalee.page>

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about juleen shaw

Juleen Shaw has over 10 years of editorial experience as a reporter, feature writer, sub-editor and editor at Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp Publishing. Currently teaching at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information (Nanyang Technological University), she has edited a diverse range of non-fiction books including *Chef Wan's Sweet Treats*, *What Makes You Clever – The Puzzle of Intelligence*, *Baba Boyhood*, and *The Revised Study Bible*.