

# MADONNAS AND MAVERICKS

## POWER WOMEN IN SINGAPORE

*Madonnas and Mavericks* is a tribute to outstanding Singaporean women who have scaled the peaks and thrived in unexpected places.

The seventeen women in this book are leaders from diverse fields: business, politics, advocacy, sports, lifestyle and the arts. Known for their strong spheres of influence, some may frequently be in the limelight but others are elusive, preferring their actions to speak louder. Regardless, these women have all contributed to Singapore's spectacular growth.

Over the course of their interviews with Loretta Chen, the women share intimate stories, career insights and life lessons, along with much laughter and some tears. We are accorded a rare glimpse into their struggles to push boundaries and break glass ceilings, while maintaining a delicate balance between a demanding career and a fulfilling home. These stories of lives well lived are a treat and an inspiration to women, and men, who seek to excel and master their own destinies.

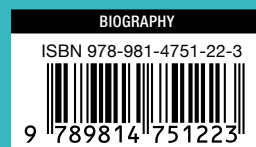
Odile Benjamin  
Chan Heng Chee  
Cynthia Chua  
Jennie Chua  
Geh Min  
Theresa Goh

Halimah Jacob  
Janice Koh  
Fanny Lai  
Tjin Lee  
Sylvia Lim  
Olivia Lum

Nichol Ng  
Ivy Singh-Lim  
Siow Lee-Chin  
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LORETTA CHEN



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For Review only

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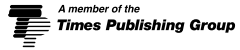


LORETTA CHEN

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*To my readers.  
For there is a Madonna and a Maverick in all of us.*



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# For Review only

## Introduction

Writing the introduction always comes last for me. The journey and process of writing take you places, and you are never the same person as you were when you first started—neither is the book. The ideas and words morph with each person you meet and each story you hear.

I have had the privilege of meeting with and talking to 17 of Singapore's most illustrious and well-respected women, across diverse backgrounds and demographics. They have shared with me their childhood struggles, countless challenges, personal tragedies and little victories. In today's global climate, perhaps now more than ever, we need greater awareness of and united support for diversity against the rise of divisive rhetoric. And we can certainly do with more Singaporean female role models.

This book is a collection of honest, searing stories from many luminaries—leaders and specialists from various fields. In the sphere of politics and diplomacy, there are Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Speaker of the House Halimah Yacob and Worker's Party Chairman Sylvia Lim. Three women have served as Nominated Members of Parliament on top of being professionals in their own fields: ophthalmologist and nature advocate Geh Min, stage actress Janice Koh and water treatment magnate Olivia Lum.

Many of them are entrepreneurs, expanding the job market in scores of industries. Nichol Ng and Janice Wong are both passionate about food, one as a grocer and the other as a chef, both leading teams of staff. Former CEOs Jennie Chua of Raffles Holdings and Fanny Lai of Wildlife Reserves Singapore are experts in their respective fields who have ventured to new, uncharted territories. Other remarkable head

honchos include Odile Benjamin of F J Benjamin, Cynthia Chua of Spa Esprit Group and Tjin Lee of Mercury.

From the realm of sports, we are honoured to have Paralympian Theresa Goh; from the music circle, the celebrated violinist Siow Lee-Chin; and from the TV world, the evergreen darling Xiang Yun. And last but not least, the spunky and uncategorisable Gentle Warrior, Ivy Singh-Lim.

There is more than one way to list these luminaries as they are all so multi-faceted. As you read their stories, you will discover other lesser-known descriptors, because amongst these women, we have playful professors, artistic businesswomen, entrepreneurial musicians, sensitive souls, cancer survivors, poverty conquerors, nature champions, enthusiastic mothers, happy singletons, amiable divorcees, contented wives and so many more. All these women have courageously redefined what it means to be women of the 21st century, and have bravely forged ahead with their dreams—fearing nothing and no one.

At the initial stage of this project, I had wondered how best to organise their stories. I had wanted to write in prose and had not yet settled on a definitive title. But I knew that I wanted to explore the archetypes of women—Maiden, Maverick, Madonna and Matriarch. In fact, I even toyed with the idea of grouping the ladies under these headers.

But then, I conducted my first interview with Chan Heng Chee, and she quizzed me on my definitions. As I started elucidating on my thesis, I realised that few women could fit neatly into any one taxonomy or archetype. Besides, all had such distinct voices that my attempt at capturing their personalities in prose would prove ultimately futile. Eventually, I decided that my format would include an “op-ed” or a “first impression”, followed by an edited transcript that captures their speech patterns and thought processes. I also figured that I would end the interview by asking them which archetype(s) they best relate to.

The title today stands as *Madonnas and Mavericks*. For the purposes of this book, I have defined Madonna as a steadfast and virtuous woman after the Judeo-Christian tradition. She is a disciplined professional with

specialised mastery that has taken her many years to hone and cultivate. This contrasts with the Maverick, a character born out of today’s fast-paced environment—a game-changer and a dynamic individual, who revels in taking the bull by its horns and seeking new adventures.

The process of putting the book together has been as intricate as these women’s lives. Coordinating the time to meet was itself a noteworthy feat because I am based in Hawaii, whilst these women are either based in Singapore or always flying the friendly skies. Some of the interviews were scheduled in between a packed day of meetings. A couple opted to have their PR gurus and expert handlers on ground to assist. Some interviews were so intimate, we ended up trading personal stories that left me in tears. An interview was held in an industrial kitchen, another on a farm and one was conducted in a boutique hotel over Christmas (with *Jingle Bells* playing softly in the background, but unceremoniously overridden by the untimely arrival of a dump truck). One encounter blossomed into a firm friendship with subsequent meet-ups and frequent chats, whilst a handful of interviews allowed me to catch up and celebrate with friends from the past. Yet others allowed me the opportunities for close encounters with some of my personal heroines. Whatever the circumstances, all the interviews were unique, informative and ultimately inspiring.

One thing to note is that the Madonnas and Mavericks in this book hold distinct views on feminism and the role of women in society. Their perspectives on marriage, motherhood and career differ and many even challenge Sheryl Sandberg’s notion of “having it all”. Some argue that we still have a long way to go, whilst some maintain that we have it good in Singapore. A few share that motherhood is tough business, while some, like Earth Mothers, take it in gleefully and ask for more. Many agree that the workspace today can still be hard on women, and observe that women can sometimes be hardest on women.

Globally, Singapore is ranked 55th out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2016 published by the World Economic Forum. For a first world country whose per capita GDP is one of the highest in the world, we can certainly demand more progress and stage a concerted

effort to increase the recognition of women in the work sphere. We should aim to offer better support and set up social structures to allow women to undertake and assert their multi-hyphenate roles.

To quote Brené Brown, “The real struggle for women... is that we are expected to be perfect and yet not look as if we are working for it. We want it to just materialise somehow. Everything should be effortless. The expectation is to be natural beauties, natural mothers, natural leaders and naturally good parents, and we want to belong to naturally fabulous families. ... And when it comes to work, we love to hear, ‘She makes it look so easy,’ or ‘She’s a natural.’”

These women have unabashedly shared what they had to undergo to get to where they are today. The climb can be arduous and unglamorous and certainly not always “natural”. But what does make it beautiful is their unyielding passion, strength in spirit and staunch belief that things will always get better. They have embraced challenges and pain; taken a stab in the back, a kick in the face and a slam of the door, and they all somehow find the courage to say in their own way, “Okay, this is how the world rolls. So this is how I will rock and roll.” They have never allowed their circumstances to define them, and instead saw them as a challenges to overcome. None of them used the victim card, “Boo hoo, poor me. It’s all my parents’, ex-husband’s, baby’s and future lover’s fault.” None. Zilch. Nada. They instead had a similar rallying cry, “Whether I like it or not, this ball is in my court. So what can I do?”

Either consciously or unconsciously, these women have all marched on to the beat of their own drums. In so doing, they have crafted personal worldviews, distinct life philosophies and their own style of authentic leadership. Whether they are Madonnas, Mavericks or any other M’s, they are true beacons of light, worthy of being exalted as Power Women in their own right.

## The Renaissance Woman



### ODILE BENJAMIN

*Odile Benjamin is the Divisional CEO and Co-Creative Director in F J Benjamin Holdings Ltd which is an industry leader in brand building and management across Asia. It also handles luxury and lifestyle fashion, timepiece, retail and distribution.*

*Odile joined the company in 1993 as a brand manager before making the switch to the creative and licensing division. She is responsible for the design, development and strategic operational direction of the in-house brand Raoul, which was a favourite of the Duchess of Cambridge. Raoul is available in department stores in the U.S., Europe and the Middle East.*

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Elegant, petite, polished and soft-spoken, Odile Benjamin gives off the vibes of a forerunner of society's elite. After all, she is the Creative Director of Raoul, a Singapore-born, internationally recognised fashion label worn by the likes of Viola Davis and Zhang Ziyi. And she is also the wife of Douglas Benjamin, Group COO of F J Benjamin, a publicly-listed company which has offices in eight cities, manages over 20 iconic brands, operates 226 stores and hires over 3,000 employees. I had imagined she might be a pretty face with politically correct answers and "easy" responses. But I was to be blissfully disappointed.

Within the first moments of our introduction, I felt an affinity with her as if she was a distant cousin or a long-lost friend from elementary school. Ten minutes into our intimate chat in the Four Seasons, I found myself asking the maître d' for napkins as I was positively tearing from her searing story of war, death and the loss of her dearly beloved father, Raoul Mizrahi. In the glossy magazines, we are told that the label's name is inspired by her son, which is not untrue. But in our exclusive interview, we finally learn the dark reality and horrors of Odile's childhood in war-torn Lebanon, her days as a refugee leading up to the adoption of London as her second home, before her meeting and falling in love with Douglas and moving to Singapore.

Indeed, life is not always just about cocktails and society parties. Odile still battles lupus, an incurable disease, and went through a severe, malignant breast cancer episode in 2015 that left her with a mastectomy. She bares her petite soul as she gamely professes to not only share her story with us, but to show us that we need to make each moment of our lives count—we never really know what will happen next.

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**Share with us your eclectic background and how that has shaped you to become the person that you are.**

I was born in Beirut in 1971 into a fairly privileged family. My father came from a background of diplomats and he started his own business in

electrical engineering. He had a pretty substantial business in the Middle East doing electrical works for the government. We had been based in Lebanon for quite a while, and I consider myself Lebanese because that's where I was born and that is where my parents were from. But our background is actually much more varied than that. I have Italian and Persian blood, with grandparents on both sides of the family that came from Persia. Part of the paternal side of the family also came from Syria—my father was born there and he moved to Lebanon as his parents were diplomats there. On my maternal side, my great grandfather was an Ambassador and my grandfather was also an Ambassador to Persia, which later became known as Iran. My mother was born in Lebanon. You can see how varied our ancestry is.

I think of myself as Lebanese because of the traditions we uphold—the food that we eat, what I like and crave for is always Lebanese—I even look Lebanese. But I am also Jewish, so that has made me different right from the onset. We are one of the few Jewish families who are actually Lebanese that originated from Syria. My maiden name is Mizrahi which means "coming from the East". If you go to the Jewish temple, the Mizrah is the Ark where the Torah Scrolls are kept, and that always faces the East in the direction of Jerusalem.

I am one of those rare Middle Eastern Jews who lived through the war in Beirut until the late 1980s. The civil war in Beirut broke out in 1975 and I was three years old. Life was never the same after. My father moved us—my mother, my brother and I, and my grandparents—to Italy but he had to keep going back because of his business. In 1979, we moved back to Beirut when things settled, as my mother could not bear to be apart from my father. We lived there until 1984. I have seen some horrific things living through the civil war. There were days and weeks where we had no water. There were curfews, electricity and food shortages, and frequent bombs blasts around our home. I have friends who have lost their limbs because of shrapnel. I've seen it all.

I left when I was 12 years old, after my father's death. Prior to that, we lived through one of the most historic times in Lebanon, which was the



Israeli invasion of 1982. This was the pinnacle of the war. Airplanes were bombing the whole of Beirut and the country was a big ball of flame, and I am not exaggerating. We stayed in the shelter underground and had to be evacuated. We were taken through the borders into Israel to seek refuge. Crazy as it sounds, we chose to head back even after my dad's death as that was our home. I recall having a happy childhood surrounded by friends and all my loved ones. We made our own happiness there in spite of all that was going on.

Dad's death was a shock, and much more than a tragedy as he did not die of old age or illness but was kidnapped and murdered by the Hezbollah. It was the start of the Hezbollah movement and in hindsight, we now know that we had been under surveillance for weeks prior to his murder. Suffice to say, my whole world fell apart. The saddest fact was that it happened on my brother's birthday, which was on Monday, 2 July 1984. Strangely, I had a premonition before and insisted that we should celebrate my brother's birthday on Sunday. We did and even popped a bottle of champagne. The next morning, our lives fell apart. It took quite some time to find my father's body.

My father was the most amazing man and everyone who knew him would agree. My father's name is Raoul and he was fearless, strong and he kept our home and our whole world in order up till the day he died at age 50. He was multilingual, highly educated, highly regarded and everybody in Lebanon knew my dad. In fact, when I was younger, I would meet people and introduce myself as Odile and they will say, "Ah, Raoul Mizrahi's daughter." Lebanon is a small country, like Singapore, so once you make your mark, you will be respected and remembered. He fought his battles throughout the war, but he truly believed Lebanon was home and that he had a right to live there. We were not unlike *The Last of the Mohicans* as the only Jews living in there, but we paid a hefty price.

After we had found my dad, we had to find a way to bury him. It was not an easy thing to do as you need to get to a Jewish cemetery which way down in the south, and that was dangerous territory. Because I was

young, I was not allowed to make the journey so I didn't get to say my last goodbye to my father. My brother who was two years older than me, and 15 at the time, undertook the journey with my uncle. My brother dug my father's grave himself and laid him to rest. So that was an abrupt end to one sad and significant chapter of my life.

We originally had planned to leave for the UK a week after my father's murder and arrangements for the paperwork had been done. However, with my father's untimely demise, all the documentation was nullified and we had to start from scratch. After that, my mum had us pack and leave for Cyprus and we had to figure things out as we went along. My mother eventually managed to get me and my brother student visas in the UK so we headed there in September while she had to wait for a while longer for her papers. It was a trying time as I did not speak a word of English and my brother spoke only a little, but we had to make it work, together with the help of my maternal aunt.

**Share with me more about your mother. She had gone through something so utterly devastating and had to raise two children on her own.**

My mum is one of the most incredible and selfless women I know. She is what you really would call a "woman of substance". She kept it all together for us even though she fell apart. Till today, she still lives her life for my father even though he has passed away close to 34 years ago. She lives in London and has dedicated her entire life to us, to our family and to my father's memory. I don't think it is possible for me to live up to her standards but that is what I aspire to do.

Honestly, given what my brother and I went through, we really had every excuse in the book to stray and not succeed in school, but my mum always knew how to get us back on track. In those days, we did not go to a therapist, especially coming from the Middle East, but our mother kept us grounded even though we had so much to deal with—change in country, new language, schools and culture. My mum resolutely kept us together and helped us overcome our trauma even though she never healed.

Her focus in those days was ensuring that we excelled in school and we did. Within a year, I moved from a French school to one of the top English all-girls' school and got 11 A's including English Language and Literature for my O Levels. Later, I graduated from my A Levels with straight A's. My brother excelled in school as well, and I think we worked hard as we wanted to make our mother proud, as well as to honour the memory of my late father.

We had gone from being Raoul Mizrahi's kids to virtual nobodies and we never got our old lives back. For that reason, I do not feel compelled to return to Lebanon nor do I feel any urge to return in the future. Lebanon took away something so fundamental to me so it is going to be too painful and futile to go back to the past. What would be the point? Nothing would look or be the same again so I would rather keep the past as memories and leave it as a chapter in a book or a movie, as if it was someone else's life.

Having said that, my father lives in me all the time and I still cry for him as most children do when they miss their parents. But my tears are tinged with the injustice of what had happened to him, even though I am proud of who he is and he will always be a hero to me. He was a hero because he never ran away and stuck to his home, his beliefs and his country. So this concluded the chapter of my life in Lebanon and the start of my life in London.

### So how did Douglas come into your life?

I met Douglas when I was 17. He was studying his final year in the university in the UK and I was still in high school. We met at a friend's birthday party and he was as fascinated by my background as I was with his. We started talking and became friends. I had never met anyone from Asia before even though I have Asian and Indian friends from the UK. It fascinated me that Douglas is from and lives in Asia, looks Caucasian and is Jewish. I did not know there were Jews in Singapore and was ignorant about the little city-state. As we started talking, we found out that we had a lot in common. Doug's childhood had its fair share of trauma too, which was not dissimilar to mine.

Later, Douglas moved back to Singapore but we remained friends and kept in touch with letters. He would write me a letter once every few months and I would reciprocate. I knew he was attracted to me but probably felt that I was a little too young. Anyhow, during the First Gulf War, Doug was in Europe and was stuck there for some reason and he gave me a call. We connected again and started dating long distance. During this period, Doug would travel back and forth from London. I was 19 and he proposed when I was 20.

In December 1991, I went to Singapore for a holiday together with my entire family—brother, mother, uncle and my aunt and he decided to propose. I said “yes” as I knew he was the right guy for me. He checked all the right boxes, and I, having gone through what I did, had a clear perspective on life and knew what I was looking for that was quite different from your average 20-year-old. To be honest, it is not something I would recommend to even my own daughter. In fact, I had one more year to go at the LSE (London School of Economics) but I gave that up as I did not feel that I needed to prove anything to anyone. Again, this is not something I would recommend to anyone but at that time, I felt that what was most important was being with the man that I love who loves me and who would give me that stability I needed. Strangely enough, my mum was agreeable too and we got married six months later.

I moved to Singapore, and even though it sounds crazy, it felt right. Honestly, Singapore then was not like what it is today but I knew that I could make it anywhere having been through harsher times. While I found it hard to adapt at the start, I quickly made it my home. In fact, it was paradise compared to what I had been through. There were many *ang mohs* and expatriates even in those days, but I never saw myself as an expat as I was here with my husband who is so rooted to this country.

Doug is a third generation Singaporean so I knew this was going to be my home but for the longest time, I was looked upon as a foreigner. It was hard trying to find my groove in the early days. I looked distinctively different, there was a language barrier and I quickly

figured that I had to adapt if I was going to make this work. And yes, now I am able to speak Singlish and even have a Singlish accent!

### **Share with us this new chapter of your life in Singapore.**

So, we got married in 1992. I had plans to transfer my credits in London to a local university that had a partnership with LSE and the University of London but, unfortunately, I got ill with lupus. I was very ill for a few months and back then, Singapore did not have that level of medical expertise and experience that could effectively combat lupus. It took us many months to get to the source of my illness and it was indeed a very unpleasant way to start my life in Singapore. But I knew this chapter would be a milestone for Doug and me and it truly shaped our relationship. My being sick from the start of our marriage sealed us together and gave us a sense of “rootedness”. It helped to mould our values as a couple and made us focus on what was important.

In fact, a few months before I was diagnosed, I had already acquired inflammation of the heart. It was unpleasant and the bedside manners of the doctors then were truly found wanting. There was no Internet and all I was given was a leaflet to read up on my condition. In fact, when I was in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, I recall the leaflet basically confirmed that death was imminent. As lupus is highly unpredictable and can attack any organ in the body, it was not uncommon for one to come down with kidney, lung or brain failure.

I recalled that I was devastated at the thought that we may not have children and I felt so guilty for having implicated Doug in this health crisis and he felt the same. But in hindsight, this has certainly glued us together to the point that many have said we are virtually inseparable and are truly bonded. Anyway, by December 1992, we received a clear diagnosis on my condition and it was a sheer miracle that I even got pregnant in March the following year.

I decided then that I was going to have the baby against all odds. My view was that I might be run over by a bus even before this disease takes over me, so I might as well have this baby. Doug, too, was not one to

leave things to fate and went all around the world to search for the best medical care for me. Eventually, we found this incredible doctor in the U.S. who assured me that I would live a long, happy, healthy life and that I could have my children. All it took was having the right doctor to give me that sense of assurance and confidence.

I did have the baby and in less than nine months later, I was pregnant again! Today, we have four children, with ages ranging from five to 24, and my oldest got married this year in Jerusalem. I have been living with lupus for 26 years now and I can honestly say that it is not easy but I am determined to lead a full life and decided that I was not going to let lupus control my life, even though there is no cure for it.

### **Lupus affects everyone differently so how does it affect you?**

Lupus is an autoimmune illness and, as you say, it has symptoms that vary from person to person. If I was diagnosed early enough, perhaps it could have been better controlled. Nonetheless, I am very disciplined about getting my regular check-ups and always ensure that I am on the right level of medications. I do not fool around with my health and live in full understanding of the limitations of my body.

In my case, lupus attacks my joints and muscles even though it started by attacking my heart. I have been on medication for the last 26 years and I continue to lead a full life, with four kids, full-time work and an active social life. I am careful to not expose myself to the sun too much, watch my diet and am mindful of stress and getting adequate rest. I am an insomniac and a busy individual so getting rest is a challenge for me but I try to keep things in perspective. I have learnt to listen to my body and will take a backseat for a few days if need be.

Honestly, lupus is now a part of my life and I did not even share this with my kids until quite recently. I live with pain everyday and learn to not focus on the pain which actually magnifies it. Yes, there are days when I wake up swollen and am unable to move in the morning but somehow, I manage to get through the day. I am my own cheerleader and have a “can do” attitude. I do not cancel anything on my schedule and continue to

plough through the day. People sometimes look at me and ask if I am well. Honestly, I want to say I really am not well, but I keep a smile on my face and keep going on. This mental strength has kept me going and I don't stop until I am really ill.

**So this is perhaps a great segue to your fight with cancer.**

You know, I had a premonition that I was going to have breast cancer as my mum had it almost 20 years ago. I watched her go through the motions and was mentally prepared that this was going to happen to me someday.

I also had another strong hunch about my cancer in 2014. I knew something was not right as I started getting intermittent sharp, shooting pains on the side of my chest. I asked by GP and my Ob-Gyn and both said I had nothing to worry about. I then approached my lupus specialist who also agreed with the diagnosis of both doctors. However, he suggested that I should see a breast surgeon if I was worried. So in July 2014, I went to see one, underwent all the tests and was told I was all clear. However, I continued to be bothered and returned six months later in January 2015 and was instructed to have a mammogram and ultrasound. Again, I was given the all clear and told to return in a year. I was adamant that there was something not right but was told by the doctor that it was probably my hormones acting up.

Six weeks later, Douglas and our youngest daughter were getting ready to go on a trip. I suddenly felt this huge lump on the side of my chest. I instinctively knew things were not right but I chose to ignore it for an entire day. That evening, as we finished packing our suitcases, I asked Doug to feel the lump and while he initially tried to dismiss it, he did feel the lump right away. We were in disbelief as we knew that cancer does not happen overnight and Doug put it off to a bump I may have suffered in the course of the day. Anyway, we were scheduled to be at the airport at 11 a.m. the next morning so I shared with Doug that I would head to the GP in the morning.

The next morning, I was up at 7 a.m. and busied myself with all the last minute errands. At 9 a.m., Doug asks if I had visited the doctor and

I said "no" as I had clean forgotten about the lump. I decided then that I would see the doctor when we returned in three weeks. However, Doug was adamant that I saw the doctor as he did not want us to have this hanging over our heads throughout our holiday. For the first time, I did not argue with him and headed straight to the doctor. I told him that I would be home by 10:30 a.m. and that we would head to the airport thereafter. Famous last words.

When I got to the doctor, he quickly got me into an ultrasound and suffice to say, I never made it to the airport. It was a huge blow but at that time, all I could think about was my daughter, who was then in her final year at UCL and expecting me in London. My mother was also anxious to see me and my youngest daughter was so excited about getting on this flight. She had been ready with her little backpack, ready to board that flight. Doug was calling me while I was undergoing the scan and all I could think about was "What am I going to tell him?" By that time, my GP had confirmed my worst suspicious and shared that they saw a 3.8cm growth.

That was Tuesday. That afternoon, we went to see a breast surgeon who confirmed we needed surgery and we had to break the news to the family that very day. It was a huge blow for everyone but I knew I needed to keep the family together by staying strong and focused. I also asked Doug to stay strong together with me and help process all matters as I was not capable of doing so.

By Thursday I was in surgery, and the doctors removed a 7cm growth that had spread to the lymph nodes! All this happened in little more than 24 hours! Anyhow, with the lump removed, I knew that I had to focus on getting better and becoming emotionally stable for the family. Through it all, Douglas was my rock. He was just incredible. My mum, too, took the next flight out that same night and stayed by my side for the next six months in Singapore. Between Doug and my mum, they saw me through some of my darkest days.

I had a daunting surgery and needed to undergo chemotherapy. I must say it was an unpleasant thing and I was scared and felt as if my life

was out of my own control. At that point, I felt so helpless and needed everyone to do everything for me. It was a huge emotional and mental adjustment. I underwent two more surgeries as the pathology after the first operation showed that the cancer cells had spread. I was so miserable then even though I knew I had to grin and bear it.

I remember waiting in the pre-operating ward at 7 a.m. No one was around and the nurses were trickling in to turn on the lights and conduct their daily chores. I recall being so nervous that I was crying and shaking uncontrollably. I felt then the full meaning of mortality—that there was nothing money could buy.

And yet at that moment, I also had my epiphany. Suddenly, I felt that there was indeed nothing I can do but trust the doctors and let my fate take its course. I knew then that my life was not in my hands and decided that I would surrender myself to the journey. I remembered looking up to the ceiling and imagined the heavens opening up to me. I said to God, “This is your child. I am in your hands and you do what you need to do”. With that, I found my inner calm and headed into surgery. I even found myself joking with the anaesthetist as he was trying to find my veins.

I have to say the team at SGH (Singapore General Hospital) was amazing. I have nothing but the best to say about them as they were so supportive. I still go there for my follow-ups and also have my lupus treated there now as well. I tell Doug who accompanies me on all my visits that they are just really, really incredible and have a way of making a terrible situation better. You know, in fact, as a trivia, I was actually in the hospital at the same time Lee Kuan Yew was warded in the last days of his life. We were on the same floor. It was quite a time that I shall never forget.

Anyway, to date, I am still on the mend, recovering emotionally and physically. I am still trying to adapt and adjust to the effects of chemo and grapple with the notion of “cancer”. It seems so unreal but I have come to realise that I am a cancer survivor. But have I really survived it? That we will need to wait and see. We commemorate our milestones

from the time you complete chemo—one year, five years, 10 years and we will see how we go from there. But you know, I have come to the understanding that it is not in my hands, so I am going to live my life to the fullest as who knows what tomorrow will bring?

I have experienced that too many times in my life and know that one’s life can change in a second. It takes only one second for your life to turnaround for the better or for the worse. It was in that one second that I lost my father; one second that I met Douglas; and both of them have changed my life—the former for the worst and the latter for the better. You just don’t know what the next moment will bring and it may shape the next chapter of your life.

### **So you had to undergo a mastectomy.**

Yes, and the only reason I am sharing this is not to deter anyone from receiving treatment but on the contrary, I wish to inspire anyone who has to undergo a similar surgery. Most procedures are simpler than what I had to go through. To be honest, mastectomy is not a pleasant procedure under any circumstances, and I opted to do a reconstruction at the same time. It was quite intricate for me as I have lupus, and was therefore not able to receive an implant. Suffice to say that it was a painful process and it took me months to recover from the surgery both mentally and physically. But today, I have come to accept my new body, and am grateful for the medical advancements that have allowed me to turn a new leaf in my life.

### **How did this experience change the way you view yourself as a woman? Many women grapple with their femininity and sense of identity as a woman after they undergo a mastectomy.**

It’s a good question because I went through all of these emotions. I felt like my body and I were mutilated. There is no other word for it as I was slashed, cut, and it was brutal. As my oncologist said, the experience is an assault on a woman’s body. Having gone through this is probably one of the most humbling experiences of my life.

My husband disagrees with me, and honestly, it was him who made it all the better for me. Like I said, he never left my side for a day, or even a minute. He was with me throughout the entire process and he saw me through all this. I could not even bear to look at myself for weeks after the surgery but his love, care and the support from my family and friends, truly helped me through that difficult time. Sure, I can sit and cry about this all day, but it is not going to change the way my body looks. So I figured that since there is really nothing I can do about it, there is not point in brooding.

Has this affected the intimacy between my husband and I? No. In fact, I give my husband full credit for making me feel whole again as he has never looked at me any differently. In fact, I do not think that anyone views me differently.

On days that I feel that things are not right, I try to take myself out of my body and look at it from the outside. I would pretend as if I was talking to my best friends and I know that this would not affect that way I feel about them. Would I see them as less of a person or would I think of them as courageous? This is how I talk to myself and beef up my own self-esteem.

This is crucial as I have three girls and self-esteem is one of the key things on a list of things that I want to impart to them. If you don't have self-esteem, no one will have it for you. You need to work on it—self-esteem isn't something you are born with—you have to work on it. Everyone has their own practice and my way is to look at myself as an outsider.

I have always been super short and while that does not help with self-esteem, I have spun it around and worked my petite frame to my advantage. I have never had to lift a heavy bag in my life—people will always help me as I look so small and frail. Because of my tiny frame, I have always been looked after, always been cuddled and am not seen as a threat to anyone—and that in itself has helped me build my self-esteem—all five foot one of me.

**I am sure our readers will find the honest, searing account of your battle with cancer inspiring. Kudos to you for not glossing over the pain, trauma and mutilation you endured. It is reassuring for our readers undergoing similar situations to know that it is okay to admit that there are days when they feel completely down and embattled, and not feel that they have to always glorify their fight with cancer or any other difficult moment in their life.**

Yes, I do want to share, and yes, it takes time to heal. I can't speak for every cancer patient, but for me it was important. I did not want to hear that everything was fine because it isn't, even till today. I don't want anyone to pull the wool over my eyes and tell me that I will never have to think about it ever again. The reality is that you do and it changes your life. As my oncologist said, it is an existential experience. One is so close to death that it reshapes everything you think about. It does take a lot of time to get over.

As I shared, my mum had cancer 17 years ago and it was similar to mine. It is painful for any parent to go through this with their child and vice versa. She's a cancer survivor and she still worries. She is 69 and it is still a real threat. Cancer stays with you for the rest of your life but somehow you manage to gain moderation and perspective over time.

**Share with us now on your career. Not many would know that you cut your teeth at a now defunct brand called Rachel B.**

I always look at Rachel B as my learning platform and it was what I would have paid if I went to five years of fashion school. We had multiple brand stores at F J Benjamin and I was working on the sourcing, buying and curating of various brands. I started sharing with Doug that I wished we had this from this brand and that from that brand, and lamented that customers wanted pieces that we don't carry. So one day, he said, "Why don't we just make the stuff we don't have. We are in Asia, how difficult can this be?"

With that, we got an American consultant to come in to help us.

She was a designer and a product development person. At the start, we were a very small set up and had a tiny studio. The consultant started working on sourcing factories, and we soon hired our own pattern maker and started acquiring our own software, computers and a cutter. We also hired a seamstress and an in-house fit model.

The consultant then started designing and I found myself disagreeing with her on her choice of fabrics and started getting involved with the creative aspects. She, however, continued to do just about everything else. But I learned very quickly as I was with her all the time. Coming from a Mathematics background, everything makes sense—from how a pattern needs to be drafted, to how it is cut and shaped. I had hands-on, on-the-ground experience and I soaked it up like a sponge.

Soon after, there was a financial crisis and things changed. I had to leave the creative aspect behind and go back to my roots, to the scientific and mathematical side of things. The change began around the late 1990s and we were faced with anxiety and the crisis of the Y2K bug. Like all companies, we had to change all our software to one that was Y2K compatible. Back then, we were already developing our own software and had this great team of Indian programmers. Even though we had a manager, I was still hands-on and worked as a number cruncher for Douglas' uncle, Nash.

As I was working on the reports, I realised that I was lacking key information each time we churned out a report. We still relied heavily on manual data and could not seem to be able to process some information from our existing systems. I took it upon myself to look into matters. I saw that things were not where they needed to be.

I had a team of programmers who were very good at what they were doing and I had retailers who knew what they wanted, but somehow the two parties didn't know how to "talk" to each other. They had totally different lingo. The buyer, for example, wanted to know what the sales-to-stocks ratio is and the other has no idea what that meant. Or if I wanted details on my gross and net margin, the computer programmers would be at a loss. I realised there was a communications breakdown so

I made myself a systems analyst and stepped up to work for the next two years with the IT department.

I worked on everything from warehousing, accounts to retail—from front-end to back-end—and I literally drafted every report and provided them with every single formula and template that they needed to get the work done. I am not able to do any programming to save my life and IT has developed so phenomenally since my days in LSE, but I knew I was well-versed enough to understand the logic behind what needed to be done. This allowed me to sit with the professional programmers to literally map out all the reports and guide them towards understanding what was needed for our retail business. It was like being a creative director of the programming team. We also mapped out product trees which was actually a lot of fun and I enjoyed it.

During that time, we were also running Guess Kids. We had great business with Guess and we had about 30 Guess Kids stores when the Guess Kids licensee in the U.S. had to fold. We were at a loss as we had stores with no product. We quickly approached Guess and suggested that we would develop products for Guess Kids until they got their house in order, otherwise we would have to shut our stores or convert the stores into something else. I already had two children by then and was called into a meeting where I was told that I had to oversee the design for Guess Kids.

I went to the designers and the factories and was not happy with what I saw. As I had children, I knew what they needed and I started sketching for them. So those sketches went to Guess and they loved it, so we produced it and I had nothing to do with it after as I was soon pregnant with our third child in 1999. But in 2001, the person running Guess Kids left suddenly so I had to step up and flew to the U.S. to present the new collection. That ended up working very well for us. So in a way, these encounters became my learning ground in manufacturing.

As for the creative and design aspect, I picked that up when I was at Rachel B as I had to understand the structure of the garment, how to get

the right cut, the finer details. For example, a 1cm margin could make a difference to a men's garment looking on-trend or off. In contrast, Guess Kids was less about design and being trendy than about comfort so we had a lot of room for play. In fact, most times, we took our ideas from what was "happening" in adult lines and translated that to the kids lines. What was key was that the clothes were "cute" so you can add a bow here and some sparkle there to make a cute little T-shirt.

There was certainly room for creativity and it was not as scientific. Guess Kids taught me what it takes to manufacture and I gained an understanding about how to order the right amount of raw materials and fabrics. I also learnt how to do the costing, tagging, shipping, labelling and testing. All this I learnt from Guess Kids in the 10 years that I was there. By then, Baby Guess and Guess Kids were in Asia Pacific and we started distributing to the Middle East as well. It was a very interesting business but I always felt that it was not my own as it still belonged to the Guess label.

One day, Douglas had the idea that he wanted to do a men's shirt line. He was tired of buying his own shirts and felt that it was silly to be spending so much money on his wardrobe. With that, Raoul was started. I initially thought he was crazy as I had my hands full with three kids, Guess Kids, Baby Guess and we were also doing Manchester United as well. I was by then involved in product development and the design for the mass sports line. We were creating all sorts of merchandise from coasters to T-shirts. By the way, Manchester United taught me how to do sourcing which was really interesting. So, in hindsight, I took all of this knowledge—sourcing, manufacturing, logistics, financials and the creative and put them all to good use in Raoul.

So yes, Raoul started as a men's line but we noticed that wives and girlfriends were coming into the stores to purchase the shirts for their men and were also buying the shirts for themselves! We then set aside a small corner in the stores and started to create a small range of shirts for the women and they picked them up like candy! As demand grew, we introduced more styles and expanded the range to skirts and shirt-

resses. So Raoul grew organically from consumer demand. The whole DNA of the brand is reflective of my aesthetic that is feminine and elegant. I am inspired by the late 1960s and 1970s for its haute feminine flair for cocktail wear and I certainly have fun pairing white shirts with big ball skirts. As of 2016, we shut all our retail shores in Singapore, but we are still available in department stores in the U.S., Europe, the Middle East and online.

**You are a self-professed mathematician at heart. Do you think you would have stumbled upon fashion if you had not married into the F J Benjamin family?**

I have always been fascinated with fashion and am privileged that I am equally comfortable working with my right and left brain. Some days, I am more comfortable with one than the other, but I am both artistic and analytical and use it to my advantage. When I was doing my A Levels, I did Art in addition to Maths and Higher Maths. Maths was always my passion so I even did Extended Maths, but I also did what they called S Level Art.

But I was always interested in fashion but it just didn't occur to me that I would eke out a career there. One of my relatives is a designer. His name is David Sassoon and he used to design for the late Princess Diana and was a London couturier. When I was 16, he was over at our house for dinner and I expressed that I really wanted to work in fashion. He dissuaded me and told me that art school is really tough and that I needed to build a good portfolio. He also shared that I had to go to an art school before I could attend a fashion school.

I was, in fact, good at art but it was not my main focus as maths was my great passion. Soon, I gave up on that art school idea and chose to study Management Sciences, which was a very scientific and mathematical course. I enjoyed it and did really well. When I decided to leave, the Dean actually called Douglas in and told him that it was a travesty that he was marrying me and taking me out of school. Till today, I do not have a degree to my name but I have no regrets.



**Did you have any expectations about Singapore before your move?**

I didn't know what was going to happen in Singapore. I knew I wanted to work though I am not a highly career-oriented and ambitious woman. I am very passionate about what I do and very determined.

That is something I learned from my dad. Before my dad passed away I was never really interested in school—I was not very academic. My dad was obviously a scientist and I used to say I hate science and maths and that I could not do it. My dad would ask me, "If the person next to you can do it, why can't you? Are you saying they are smarter than you? If a question is being asked, then there must be an answer. You just need to work hard to find it."

So, my dad's words have stuck with me and it has become my mentality towards life and I impart that to my kids. I don't want them to give up too easily. Kids tend to participate in many different activities but I tell them that they must keep at it and achieve something out of what they undertake. My oldest daughter eventually graduated from UCL with first class honours in Information Technology for Business Management—something she did not want to do nor did she think she could do. I told her to persevere, succeed through that and do whatever she wants to after. She did and went on to read her master's in Psychology Applied in Fashion.

**How is like working with your husband? Share with us tips on how you make your partnership work.**

I think boundaries are really important. There is no hard and fast rule. For us, it is about respecting each other's abilities and work. It is also about defining the roles very clearly. As colleagues, we discuss, talk, put our ideas forward and try to come to an agreement but it is very clear to me that he is the boss, and that his final word *is* the final word. Doug makes the final decisions at work and whether I agree with them or not, those are the decisions that stay. After all, he is the one who reports to the Board, not me. He has to account for everything that happens.

As his wife, however, I argue and debate with him. Doug and I have so

much that binds us together. Sure, we have our moments like any other married couple but we agreed from day one that we would never go to bed arguing. So whatever happens, we resolve our issues before we go to bed, fully at peace with each other.

**If you had your life philosophy on a car bumper sticker, what would it say?**

Don't sweat it if you can't control it.

**Favourite fashion item?**

I will have to say it's not a fashion item, but it's my hair. I lost my hair and I didn't have any hair for a while so that was really tough. Hair and nails really make a difference to how a woman feels about herself and not many women pay enough attention to that. Like a handshake, the way your hand feels and looks says a lot about your personality.

**What pisses you off?**

Dishonesty.

**How do you want to be remembered?**

As a kind, loving person.

**Given what you know now, what would you say to a younger version of you?**

Don't underestimate yourself.

**What would you say to God when you meet him?**

Thank you.

**What role do you identify with? A Madonna, Maverick or any other M word?**

I'll say I'm a Mere Mortal, Multi-tasking Mother and most recently, Mother of the Bride!

## The Controversial Diplomat



### CHAN HENG CHEE

*Ambassador Chan Heng Chee is Ambassador-at-Large with the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Singapore's Representative to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. She is the Chairman of the National Arts Council and a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. She is a board member and chairperson in various universities in Singapore such as National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Yale-NUS College and Singapore University of Technology and Design.*

*Previously, she was Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 1989 to 1991 with concurrent accreditation as High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. She was also Singapore's Ambassador to the United States from July 1996 to July 2012. When Ambassador Chan left Washington at the end of her appointment, she received the Inaugural Asia Society Outstanding Diplomatic Achievement Award, the Inaugural Foreign Policy Outstanding Diplomatic Achievement Award and the United States Navy Distinguished Public Service Award.*

*Ambassador Chan has received numerous awards in Singapore including the first Woman of the Year in 1991, The Meritorious Service Medal in 2005 and The Distinguished Service Order in 2011. She was also twice awarded the National Book Awards for "The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grassroots" in 1978 and for "A Sensation of Independence: A Political Biography of David Marshall" in 1986.*

*She has also been the recipient of Honorary Degrees of Doctor of Letters from the University of Newcastle (Australia) and the University of Buckingham (United Kingdom), as well as Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from University of Warwick (United Kingdom).*

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"So what is the title of the book?"

"Matriarchs, Madonnas and Mavericks. But I haven't really settled on a title yet..."

"So who do you consider a Matriarch, a Madonna and a Maverick?"

"I see Olivia as a Maverick, she became a serial entrepreneur with no formal education. And Cynthia Chua as a Maverick as she seizes opportunities, utilises market forces and manipulates social media and savvy branding to grow her business empire..." I was about to continue but she interjects, not impolitely, but more out of interest.

"How are you defining Madonna?"

"Hmmm. That's a great question. I started defining Madonna as the pop star Madonna, the queen of reinvention, as people identify with that better. But I later decided that I should define her in the traditional sense, as a role or archetype to contrast with Maverick, the game-changer. So Madonna is immaculate, pristine and virtuous—someone who has perfected a single craft and has longevity."

"So what am I?"

"You are a Matriarch but I am not defining merely in terms of age." I checked to see if she took offence. None was taken as she knew I meant it sincerely. "You broke the glass ceiling and were a first in many ways and domains..."

"But I can also be a Maverick," she said. "I hold many hats and have changed roles so many times, going with the flow."

"Indeed, I can see that... your resume is endless," I laughed with all due respect.

Suffice to say, Prof Chan is a poised picture of diplomacy. Her answers

were measured and guarded, and there was a sense that there is always more unsaid. I interviewed her in her office in the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities in SUTD (Singapore University of Technology and Design) where she is Chair, so I found it more appropriate to refer to her as Professor Chan instead of Ambassador Chan. Somehow one cannot help but use these terms of deference with her, which must say something about her bearing and countenance.

Unlike Ivy Singh-Lim who is all text and no subtext, Prof Chan is a study in measured accuracy and one gets the distinct sense that there are many filters at play (or at work) when she speaks. This is not to say she does not speak her mind, she does. She has distinct points of view that raises eyebrows and gets her embroiled in controversies, yet her demeanor is one that is practiced and calculated, like a stealthy jaguar on the hunt—cool, calm, collected. Though make no mistake, one false move and you are prey.

So we begin. And oh, it is perhaps no surprise that I also dropped the word “Matriarch” from my title.

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You know, I didn’t start out wanting to be a diplomat. I was never very ambitious, few believe that, but it is true. I actually wanted to be a librarian as that was the only career available to women educated overseas. That and a writer.

### **So you have always wanted to be a writer?**

Well, I enjoy writing, I enjoy imagining. One of these days I will write another book and it will be my story. But I cannot decide if I should write it as fiction or non-fiction. I spend a lot of time reading novels in my down time. On board an aeroplane, I would prefer to read a novel if I am not writing a speech. I have a fond wish that when I become less busy in everything I am doing, and most of it is in the foreign policy, diplomacy and academic field, I would be writing a novel. Well, let’s see!

### **Aside from all the numerous firsts you have garnered, what did you think you would be doing when you got your degree in Political Science?**

If I tell people, frankly, I never thought I would be what I am today, nobody will believe me. I was just meandering through. The only thing that was constant, as I look back in my life was this: I always wanted to do my best. I am not always the top girl but I am competitive. If I am not top, I want to be near the top.

Now, I knew, when I finished school at O Levels that I wanted to go to the university. That was a very clear goal. When I finished getting my BA, I asked myself, “What are you going to do now?” I knew then that I wanted to work in the public sector. I didn’t use the word “public sector” in those days because that was not the word. I didn’t want to work in the commercial world—I wanted to work in something for the good of people—a general good. So, I decided I could be a teacher, work in the civil service, or be a librarian.

I wanted to be a librarian very much because I knew that the then University of Singapore gave scholarships to people to study library science. Most of the top women, when I was an undergraduate, went into librarianship because the other areas were not opened to them. So, I said, “Ya, that’s where I want to be. I want to go overseas. So I’ll be a librarian.” Besides, I did love books.

But because I had a first class in Political Science, the head of my department said, “Look, why don’t you take on a research scholarship? We’ll try and get you one to do a PhD elsewhere.” So the head of my department wrote to Cornell University and asked if they would accept me. I got the scholarship and I was not bonded.

I went over there but, you see, this is where the odd thing comes in. I was one of the first few Singaporeans to go to the United States for a PhD, most went to Britain and Australia. We had this idea that when you finish the PhD in say, three years, you would come home. When I arrived in Cornell, I had a shock because I was told, “Oh, a PhD in Cornell takes at least five years, typically five to seven years.” You know,

Ben Anderson who just died? He was a cultural and political scientist. He wrote the book *Imagined Communities*, which is on nationalism and it is considered a great book. Well, Ben was in his ninth year in Cornell when I arrived. And I thought, "Oh God! I'm not going to stay here that long for a PhD."

I met all sorts of smart women, including Nancy McHenry who became my dear friend in graduate school. She later married an academic and is probably a good housewife and mother till this day. Anyway, back then, Nancy was from Stanford and she went to Thailand to serve as a Peace Corps teacher. She and I were the only two women in that batch. Then, she was trying to decide between marriage and her PhD as she was engaged to someone reading his postdoc. She kept talking to me about marriage that I started to think, "Oh God, if I stayed for five or seven years, I'll never get married. I do want to go home to get married."

The result was that she and I teamed up and decided we would not continue to read our PhD. We went to our professor and said that we wanted to drop out to do an MA instead. There, we found another two or three men also trying to drop out of the program. Now, Cornell was really crossed because it took in ten students for its PhD, and five of us dropped out to sign on to the MA. You can do it within the first two weeks and I did that. So, I did my MA, wrote my thesis and went back to Singapore as I was offered a job in the Department of Political Science at NUS. Back then, I was the first Singaporean to join the department. There was a Malaysian and the rest are British, Australians and Indians.

Anyway, Cornell is an institution that makes you question and think. I studied with the best in the United States for Southeast Asian studies and the education was very good for me. It helped that they liked my thesis too. In fact, my book *The Politics of Survival* published in 1971 was my MA thesis. It became part of the Oxford in Asia monograph series and that launched me into the arena.

Even after I came back, Cornell remained very helpful. Whenever there were Americans or friends of Cornell going to Singapore, they said to go and see Chan Heng Chee. Conversely, if they were organising a conference

they would invite me to be the Southeast Asian representative. So even though I didn't have a PhD, I was getting into the circle and was thrown into the orbit of international conferences very young, at around age 25.

There were very few women in academia and I was the only woman in my department. The men in my department were very good to me so I didn't feel discriminated against and it helped that I wasn't a bad looker, was lively, interested, and in a way, rather western. My interests included literature, theatre and the arts, and I was very much in touch with the architectural scene.

Back in Cornell, I had a host father and he was a professor of Architecture and I used to go to his house all the time. I looked after his kids when he and his wife went to New York for a spot of theater and I would stay overnight for the weekend. I would browse through all his books and sieve through his records, music, literary and artistic collections that fed my interest, curiosity, cultural education and really helped to deepen and broaden my horizons.

When I came back, I guess people found me interesting, and I had a sense of humor. So, I got on with my colleagues very well and never felt anyone was against me. In fact, I thought they treated me rather preciously. Fortunately or unfortunately, my life has been like that, which is why there isn't much anger in me.

During that period, I started writing to express my views which were not always in sync with the government. In fact, my monograph was seen by Alex Josey<sup>1</sup> to be critical of the government. I received a terrible review from him, which ironically led to my books getting sold out!

### **Yes, there is no press like bad press.**

I suggested in my writings that the PAP (People's Action Party) had pushed too hard in the years leading up to the Separation, which led to the rise in racial tensions. I was also of the opinion that Tunku Abdul Rahman, then President of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), took umbrage at the fact that the PAP stood for the elections. He thought Singapore would not and PAP said there was no such understanding.

<sup>1</sup> Alex Josey was a British journalist and political commentator, best known for his biographies on Lee Kuan Yew.

Even though I ended the chapter on an upbeat note saying that Singapore will prevail because of the strong leadership, that was not good enough for Alex Josey. He pounced on me and cast me as this maverick who was criticising the PAP. Looking back, I now know that even if we didn't separate in 1965, we would have separated sooner or later as it was a matter of time.

Typically, I would write things when I disagreed and I disagreed on two things. One, that there was too narrow a space for intellectuals and academic freedom, and two, I felt that the government was too intolerant of and tough towards the opposition. These were the two issues I voiced my opinions on and I was never personal in my criticisms. My commentaries were always based on principle and I never spewed venom.

Honestly, I think that was why I was tolerated and nothing happened to me. In fact, when my book came out, Dr Goh Keng Swee gave a call and I was asked to go to his office to see him. He was then the Minister for Defence. He was curious to see who Chan Heng Chee was as I was the first Singaporean to write on Singapore politics.

So, when I showed up to see him, we chatted and he wanted to find out about my family background, my influences and defining moments to know what shaped me. He must have decided that I am not a dissident nor revolutionary, but was just being a Western-educated academic and university liberal who wanted to share a piece of my mind and my opinions. I think after meeting me he must have felt that I was okay. It is also for this reason that I always kept out of joining a political party. I felt that as an academic, I should not be seen as being partisan. So, I've always maintained that I am independent.

### **That is why you opposed the NMP (Nominated Member of Parliament) scheme?**

Well, at that time, I thought that the NMP scheme is a retrogression. You have democracy and everybody is elected. Why are you doing this? I knew that this really was a strategy, or a ruse to deter people from voting for the opposition. I would say things like that, which was against the tide.

I remember an incident around in 1986. Francis Seow<sup>2</sup> was elected the President of the Law Society. I don't particularly admire or not admire Francis Seow. In fact, I don't know him so I am neutral. But when he took over the Law Society, one of the ministers said it was a political statement and issued an official memo that said interest groups should not participate in politics.

During the time that this matter raged on in the media, I wrote a letter to the press saying I believed that in constitutional democracies, interest groups should have a legitimate role in politics. I didn't write it in a rude fashion but as an even-tempered academic letter. This caused quite the furore and many people thought I was very brave to speak up as the PAP was quite tough in the 1980s. But, nothing happened to me.

I remember walking into an elevator one day and there was Mr Dhanabalan who was then the Foreign Minister. He asked me, "You took the position of Francis Seow?" I said, "Look, it's not about Francis Seow. It's about the principle." He said, "You did it on principle?" I said, "Yes." He nodded. The government didn't take action against me and I noticed, over the weekend, Wong Kan Seng, then Minister for Community Development, gave an interview to refine his position on the matter.

By 1987, I was asked if I would think about taking on the appointment as the Permanent Representative to the United Nations. My own sense is that I may have been on their minds as a potential. The interpretation by many was that the government was trying to get rid of me, but I disagree. I did not think it was fair to make that assumption of Tommy Koh's posting as well. The government could easily have handled me if they wanted to.

Anyhow, I shared with Mr Dhanabalan that I would like to consult with my then husband, Tay Kheng Soon as I was married by then. After discussing with him, I decided to accept the position. My co-workers

<sup>2</sup> Francis Seow was a lawyer who served as Singapore's Solicitor-General from 1969 to 1971. He stood for the 1988 general election as a member of the Workers' Party and lost marginally against PAP. Just before the election, Seow was detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for 72 days. According to his account, he was subjected to torture, including sleep deprivation and intensely cold air conditioning. Amnesty International issued a public statement in 2007 mentioning Seow as one of two prominent Singaporean lawyers who were penalised for exercising their right to express their opinions and called him a "prisoner of conscience".

told me that as a political scientist, I should take on the role, otherwise I should have my head examined.

Up till 1989, I have never been a diplomat and nor has any other woman been appointed. The ministry and in particular, Dhanabalan was so very understanding. He said, "Look, Heng Chee, you know New York is a rough town, why don't you just go join the delegation of the UN General Assembly, and decide if you can see yourself living in New York." So, I went. In fact, before that, I attended a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference just to get a taste of what the work would be like. You see, the Ministry wanted to make sure I was all right, and I appreciated it.

At that time, many had no idea that I am a night owl and don't sleep very much at night. One of the things that stood in my favour was my ability to stay up throughout the course, which I learnt was much needed in NAM. I was there for Cambodia and had to sit through the whole night in what is euphemistically called a demonstration of "S Power" (which stands for "Sitting Power" or "Staying Awake Power").

I was brand new, a trained academic, who is no stranger to late night reading and writing and so I sat there until 5 a.m. in the morning. It's a real test of manhood for many of the diplomats and they often fall asleep and opt to have a junior officer sit in their place. My tenacity rose eyebrows and people were asking, "Who is this young woman?" I was in my 40s and wasn't that young then, but I certainly won their respect. The international community was saying, "Gosh! She is awake, alert *and* she intervenes!" I am made for the UN because of my "S Power"—that and the fact that the Foreign Ministry was very generous with the first woman diplomat they were going to call "Ambassador".

The person I was meant to succeed was Kishore Mahbubani. He was gracious, generous and took the time to explain the workings of the UN to me. He introduced me to people and gave me encouragement and advice. He told me that I should be seen as a "serious ambassador" and not be regarded as the woman ambassador dressed in beautiful clothes like a supermodel. There were not many women ambassadors at that

time, maybe four or five globally. I believe he also wrote to the Foreign Ministry to request for my use of the car and driver. You see, the Foreign Ministry is usually very strict about the use of the car for official duties, but Kishore wanted the driver to help keep an eye on me, not unlike a personal bodyguard. That's why I say, from the university to the Foreign Ministry, I have always felt well looked after. I felt that my colleagues were very kind and they all treated me very well.

I have to say though, that when I was in the university, my promotion to a full professor came a bit slow in the beginning, and people would ask me, "How was it? Were you promoted?" The answer was "no" and I would ask, "Did you think gender was an issue?" Honestly, I always felt that it was my politics rather than gender that affected me. Looking back, I would say it was probably both. In the 1990s, I was up against a male colleague for promotion. He was the head of my department but I cleared the hurdles before he did. The university tried to keep me back so as to wait for him to clear his hurdles, but he could not. In the end, they did end up making me a full professor but it was undeniable that I was held back for quite a bit.

### **So in many ways, fortunately or unfortunately, you were aided by your gender?**

Yes. I think, for women to do well, they should not be angry. I was a feminine female and I was not angry, which is very important. I had too many other fights in politics so I did not think to fight my gender. I remained authentic to myself. If you bang the table, it doesn't come across so well. Although, now that I am older, I can make "angry women's comments" and people don't mind it so much. They think it comes with age.

### **What do you think is your greatest take away from having been in the U.S. for as long as you have?**

My greatest take away is that the United States is a really creative place and I found everybody to be so helpful. The one thing I can say is this: women in the U.S. and Singapore seem to enjoy motherhood rather

differently. I would observe the women in Washington, New York or even a small town in America. They look so happy being mothers. Whether they are well heeled professional women or middle income workers, they seem to view motherhood as part of their life cycle and have no qualms going back to work even with baby in tow.

I wish we could have that in Singapore and allow the women to go back to work and yet be integrated into the community. I've always said that we should find a way for women to get back at work easily even after they have their babies. For women who don't want to get married and have babies, it's okay too. The point is, I hope there is less stigma and judgment against working moms and childless career women. All should be acceptable positions and society should not judge.

The other take away I have is that the women in the U.S. are ambitious. Just take a look at Hilary Clinton. I don't think many Singaporean women harbour the thought of being a prime minister. That's the difference. The level of ambition is different but so is the level of understanding of what a woman's life can be like. I do think we need a mindset change. We have to have more crèches to free up the women's daytime hours and we must also "catch" and be aware of our own prejudices.

I have often noticed that people shun the mother in a party, choosing instead to talk to whom they see as a more powerful individual in the room. If you tell them you are a "homemaker looking after my baby", the person may turn around and talk to somebody else. So we need to change our attitudes to mothers and motherhood. Also, to mothers, here's a note: I know the hours are hard and tiring but do not give up. Keep up with your other interests even as you are looking after baby.

**Do you think you would have come this far if you were a mother?**

No, quite frankly. Though I think I would have been just as happy because I would not know what it is to come this far or to have this life. And by "this far", I mean, I am thankful in my life, I've always done what I want and love what I do. I probably have an instinct that if I

don't like something, I don't want to touch it. I also have quite a bit of energy, am interested and can get excited with a lot of things. These days, I Google and YouTube a lot. First TED talks, then movies, music, and now, I Google and YouTube all kinds of stuff.

**So in other words, because you never had children, you have more time to pursue your diverse interests? And what do you say to your critics that say that you have "sold out" over the years?**

Let me put it this way. I was divorced but I harbour no bitterness and I kept up with my stepsons. I don't as much now, but I know if I want to see them, we will meet even though we are all very busy. I wish my ex well and I am glad, I have no anger.

But here is something that connects with your idea of the Maverick. Many have come up to me to tell me that I sold out because the government made me an ambassador. To that I say, "Nonsense!" They made me an ambassador because they read what I was writing and probably found that I was calming down or mellowing. And why did I do that? I did it of my own volition.

Actually, I was married to someone who was quite rebellious too. He is an architect and a thinker in his own right but I don't always agree with him. Suffice to say we had very good discussions. And you know, I teach courses on development in other societies and you soon begin to realise that it is not that easy to build a nation.

Governance is not easy—just take a look at the different countries and you see different kinds of problems. Whether you agree with their politics—depending on what end of the spectrum you are on, if you are socialist-leaning or more democratic. At least I've always thought the PAP government was honest. I am a democratic socialist. I like the PAP of today where their policies are more inclusive. Their turning a little left is right for the times, and I do think you do have to look after people who are left behind. A pure free market doesn't work for me, in fact, it doesn't work anywhere else.

## The Power Paralympian



### THERESA GOH

*Theresa Goh Rui Si is a Singaporean swimmer and Paralympic medalist. She won bronze in the 100m breaststroke at the 2016 Summer Paralympics and holds the world records for the 50m and 200m breaststroke events.*

*She received the 2001 Sportsgirl Merit Award from the Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC) and was named Sportsgirl of the Year in 2002 and 2003. From 2004 to 2006, she was the SDSC's Sportswoman of the Year. Theresa received a special award at the SDSC's Sports Superstar Awards 2007 for outstanding achievements in swimming, and in August that year she was conferred the Pingat Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Medal) in the National Day Awards.*

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Listening to Theresa's recorded interview, she sounds just like your typical, well-adjusted Gen Y-er—that incredibly sophisticated, tech- and media-savvy generation who has been exposed to endless marketing since early childhood. Her Singlish accent makes her hugely approachable, much like your average girl next door, except that Theresa is no girl next door. She is a top athlete who has represented Singapore internationally and has even been awarded the Public Service Medal for her achievements in the pool. Above all, her cheerful and warm disposition does not betray any hint that she was born without the use of her limbs due to a birth defect known as spina bifida. Her exuberance and confidence wins you over and none's the wiser.

She arrived for our interview in her wheelchair and wheeled herself easily and comfortably into Ben & Jerry's on the third floor where we had agreed to meet. Theresa Goh is very much as able as you and me—she had not ask for any concessions to meet at a wheelchair accessible spot or anything. In fact, she is certainly more able than me who was in a full brace because of a surfing accident and needed a walking aid!

One of the key takeaways from Theresa is the notion that we should not lower the bar for people with disabilities even as we strive as a nation and society to level the playing field. It may sound like an oxymoron but it isn't. Simply put, she urges us all to see disability not as a lack of but as a difference. Theresa makes a crucial point that in order for society to move ahead, we must recognise and accept our diversity and differences. Rather than keep navel-gazing, we should reach out to see how we can level the playing field by focusing on the similarities or the objectives we are trying to achieve.

Theresa is also no Pollyanna. While she has for the most part been spared the cruelty of bullies, she is well aware that the world can be a mean place and has shared with me that given a choice, she would rather not birth a child with her condition. I found this thought sobering—here is a woman who has triumphed in spite of herself but is unwilling to have another follow in her footsteps, which tells me—Dear World, there is still so much we can work on.



In fact, Theresa opted to come out as a lesbian in June this year and became a Pink Dot Ambassador. It was not an easy decision as most athletes choose to remain in the closet, and this is Singapore, after all. However, Theresa felt the need to embrace and live her life authentically and decided to make public her sexual identity both as a personal statement as well as making a courageous show of her support for the LGBTQIA community, and for human rights and the freedom to love.

Indeed, Theresa is inspiring not because she is a person with disabilities. She inspires because she has the strength and tenacity to surmount the odds to become a top athlete. She has been able to achieve more than what most able-bodied persons can achieve. And she has done so with much good cheer, kindness of heart and generosity of spirit. That, in my books, is a champion any day, able-bodied or otherwise.

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**Aside from medals and swimming prowess, share with us more about you, your family and your childhood.**

I am the oldest of three and have two younger siblings, a sister and a brother who are both able-bodied. When my parents were planning to have my sister, they wanted to have a closer age gap as they didn't want me to be alone. They wanted me to have a sibling I could relate to, talk to and play with. My brother came into the picture, four or five years later by accident, but of course, we love him all the same. We grew up really close and my whole family is very close-knit. Of course, we have our own fair share of issues growing up as teenagers and all families have their own problems but we are always able to overcome anything together and we are as close as we can possibly get.

When I was born, thorough screenings weren't accessible and there was a lack of technology at that time. Throughout my mother's prenatal checkups, my parents had no reason to suspect anything. They assumed they would have a normal birth and a completely normal child with no complications. But when I was born, the doctors took me away from my

mum and didn't tell her why. Of course she was very worried. The doctors then found out that I had spina bifida, which in basic, simple terms, means that my spinal cord did not fuse up properly and that affected my lower limbs and parts of my body. The thing about spina bifida is that the higher the location of the infection in the spine, the more parts of the body will be affected. My spina bifida is present in the middle of my spine so it only affects my lower limbs. I know if it had been higher, it would have affected my brain as well. Some of the spina bifida kids I met have shunts in the back of their brains to drain out the fluids.

When I was born, my parents were really worried. They had to measure the circumference of my head everyday just to make sure it wasn't growing bigger. I feel really lucky that I don't have a shunt, as my life would have been so different otherwise. From the time I was born, my parents were amazing. Of course, I am sure they had their moments of shock and fear, but they didn't dwell. They started becoming very proactive in researching on all the different ways they can help make me become as independent as possible.

In the days before the Internet, my mum started reading through the Yellow Pages to find out more about spina bifida. It took a lot of work back then, but they finally found a specialist who has dealt with spina bifida and they went to look for him. I ended up undergoing surgery when I was three months old to close the hole in my spine. I later had a couple of other surgeries on my legs and my hips before I was six or seven years old. Spina bifida requires me to go for yearly checkups to track my progress as it affects the bladder and I am unable to feel from my knees down. The doctors have to check on a number of things to see if I am improving, deteriorating or remaining constant.

As a baby, it was really hard for me to crawl as I would fracture my knees or my hip and my parents would have to take me to the hospital. Looking back, I should have been a lot more careful. I also had a catheter to enable me to pee and my mum had to help me all the time back then. Today, I'm very independent but my mum was there when my dad had to work. I was prone to urine infections too as I was careless in my youth.

So I was always in and out of hospital a lot and all the nurses and doctors knew me. Every time I was discharged from hospital, I would receive a present from my parents so I would always look forward to the end of my hospital visits.

My parents made sure that I didn't get special treatment as much and as far as possible. If I fell down, they'll help me up but they would also discipline me as a means of teaching me so that it made me feel normal. They wanted me to be raised "normally" and receive equal treatment as my sister instead of spoiling me. If I did something wrong, I would get scolded or even caned so I grew up without thinking too much about my disability. In all honesty, I didn't even realise consciously that I had a disability.

It was only when I was much older and started to go to school that other people really opened my eyes and made me see how different I was. It was not that they treated me differently or poorly, but that I realised I needed a wheelchair or a pair of crutches to go to toilet which the regular able-bodied child would not require. Throughout my entire school life, everyone was very helpful and my classmates would even carry me up four flights of stairs so I can get to the computer labs. How could you ask for anything more than classmates who would help so willingly without expecting anything back? As a result, I grew up never really focusing on my disability nor was I kept cooped up in the house.

My parents were always very insistent on my achieving independence and set about to make sure that I could do almost anything on my own. I started reading about mindsets as I knew that in time, I would have to rely on myself and had to achieve full independence, even though my siblings were always helpful whenever help was needed. I don't know how they saw me from their point of view, whether they felt I was different from them, but the truth is, I was really happy growing up as a child. Maybe I should ask them one day but the fact is, I always felt that I had a pretty normal childhood. As a family, we played, we would eat out, head to swimming pool and did "normal" things. The only exception was that I spent a lot of time in the hospital.

### **Do you recall any bullying or negative encounters growing up?**

I do not recall any negative encounters. I knew of a few of my able-bodied friends who were bullied in school. They were called names and I just cannot fathom how people can do that. I wasn't bullied and was, in fact, treated extremely well. It could be that most people overcompensated and treated me exceptionally nicely. My teachers were always helpful. In fact, when I was in secondary school, they kept me in the same classroom for five whole years so I never had to change my classroom venue!

My primary school was wheelchair accessible so I could move around easily. If the lift broke down, the teachers would carry me. It's just no big deal—if I needed help, I'll receive help which contributed a lot to making me feel included and never feeling left out. The only thing I didn't do was PE (Physical Education). It was also in part because I had already started swimming by the time I was in secondary school and had my own form of physical activity that I did every week. I think my teacher saw that as a good reason for me to not partake in PE with the rest of the students and exempted me.

### **Why and how did you start swimming and how did that become a serious part of your life?**

I started swimming at five years old for fun, as any child would. I would go to a public pool with my family and played around, splashed water and start swimming simply for sheer enjoyment. Many kids enjoy being in the water because it makes you feel weightless and it certainly feels very different than when you are on land.

When I was about twelve, one of the volunteers from Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC) spotted me in the pool with my dad and asked him to take me to the upcoming National Disability Swimming Champs just to try it out. My parents said "why not" since I was swimming anyway and enrolled me in the competition. I ended up doing pretty well and was later selected for their training programs. That was my introduction to SDSC and how I started to learn about swimming, wheelchair tennis and horseback riding. There were so

many different sports that I could choose from and try out. I tried out whatever I could get my hands on but I really enjoyed swimming and wheelchair tennis. Horseback riding was also quite fun and I recall riding around the tent with candy cane posts during the Christmas seasons. Horseback riding really trains your core and it was great fun being on the horse.

It came to a point where I had to choose one activity to focus on as I was doing way too much which took up too much time. Needless to say, I chose swimming. I selected it above the other sports as I really enjoyed it and loved how I felt in the water, and of course, it was also because I was doing really well. So I joined the program though it was not as well-supported as it is today. The coaches were all volunteers. I remember at one point, I was training five times a week with a different coach every day. All of the coaches were pretty good considering the amount of time each coach puts in—they gave whatever they could. Without them, there would have been no swimming program, so I really appreciated them, plus it helped that it was really fun.

One of the things I really enjoyed was the group dynamics. We were swimmers of different age and abilities, but we would all have fun in the pool. We were training, of course, but we thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. There was always a lot of laughter and we went through everything together. That was one of the key things that kept me in swimming—it was definitely because of the people. As time went by, I got increasingly better. It definitely helped a lot that I got more professional, full-time coaches. My first professional coach was Uncle Siong, better known to all as Ang Peng Siong. Before him, I had Edmund Lee. He is still coaching now and I am always grateful to him for training me to reach my personal best before I was to learn and train under Uncle Siong.

When I first met Uncle Siong around 2002 in the Commonwealth Games, he was not our coach yet though he was coaching able-bodied swimmers. He got to know us and we started talking and he got personally interested in taking on the program. So after the Commonwealth Games,

the SDSC got him on board and he started training a couple of other swimmers and I. He was my first, full-time, regularly-paid coach. It was something new to all of us. It felt as if we were breaking new grounds, and I soon saw a really huge improvement in my timings and started to feel really strong and fast.

Uncle Siong had been a coach for a very long time so his experience, programs and his intense focus on me really helped. He certainly knew what he was doing. This is not to say that the other coaches didn't know what they're doing but he was certainly better as he was very technical. When I first joined him, I had a full two weeks of drills that I found so boring, but it was what was needed to make me swim faster because I had to get very smooth in my technique in order to progress. The key, I learnt, was for me to be on my side as much as possible as, because when you are face down with your head towards the floor, you have the most amount of resistance. These technical things were all new to me then.

Techniques have changed a lot over the years so there are always new drills. We would spend at least two hours on drills, followed by our entry into the water. We had to keep repeating these technical details as it required a lot of muscle memory. Once you do it often, your muscle remembers and you start to perform the actions without even thinking about it. I had two-hour drills every day for two to three weeks and I must say, it was so tedious but I learned so much from that and that was really important.

I had to make sure I got my technique down pat because even if I was fast and powerful, I would be wasting all my power and strength without the proper techniques. That was one of the biggest difference learning from Uncle Siong. I realised that while I was already technically more efficient than others, I needed to really master my technique to excel. That really helped to push me forward to the next level. By the time I headed to the Athens Paralympics, I participated in seven events and I made it to all the seven finals. That was beyond anything I had ever expected. I was 17 when I went for my first Paralympics game and was 21 when I was at my second. I have participated in three so far.

## The Sweetest Sensation



### JANICE WONG

*Chef Janice Wong's never-ending passion for culinary art has propelled her forward to test the limits of dessert making. The native Singaporean has learned from some of the world's best chefs, including U.S. luminaries Thomas Keller and Grant Achatz, virtuoso Spanish chocolatier Oriol*

*Balaguer, and prodigious French pastry chef Pierre Hermé.*

*An undisputed favourite amongst sweet-toothed Singaporeans, her dessert restaurant 2am:dessertbar has redefined the dessert experience, pushing the boundaries between sweet and savoury, with carefully researched progressive dishes. In 2014, she also launched her eponymous sweets concept, JANICE WONG. Chef Janice has received worldwide recognition for her cutting-edge creations and is a regular on the global pop-up circuit—proof that 2am:dessertbar is more than just a sugar rush. She has twice been named Asia's Best Pastry Chef by the prestigious San Pellegrino Asia's 50 Best, in 2013 and 2014.*

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As her staff led me through a seemingly endless maze of chocolate bonbons, edible artworks and pineapple tarts, I felt as if I was Alice in Wonderland, falling happily down the rabbit hole. All I remember wishing was that an “Eat Me” invitation would magically present itself somewhere in that pristine kitchen so that I could partake in some of that yummy, tantalising, sweet goodness that has taken much of Singapore, and now Tokyo, by storm.

Then as if by magic, she appeared, dressed every inch the chef. Her diminutive frame took me by surprise as I realised that her reputation precedes her, and I was expecting a towering Amazonian woman to appear and say, “I am Janice. Hear me roar!” But Chef Janice is quite the opposite. She looks and feels like your precocious little teenage sister, on the cusp of junior college-hood, who may suddenly get infatuated with boys having been raised in an all-girl convent—until she speaks.

When she did, I could instantly see why the self-styled visionary, artist, author, culinary stylist and photographer, continues to inspire and fascinate the media with her creative concoctions and penchant for edible art. She is the perfect embodiment of yin and yang, science and art, and she speaks in a deliberate, almost careful manner while describing some of her most amazing edible art installations.

In fact, in 2011, she fashioned seven pieces that completely transformed the studio space. That feat launched her as a credible food artist and she has since then been commissioned by galleries, restaurants and clients both local and overseas to craft what she calls “interactive art”. Her website states that Janice is taken by “a pursuit for perfection in imperfection”, and an “appreciation of imperfection in perfection”. The Japanese have a term for this, *wabi-sabi*. While no literal English translation for this term exists, suffice to say that *wabi-sabi* understands that tender, raw beauty of a grey December sky, which acts as a backdrop to the aching elegance of an abandoned old shed. It celebrates the cracks and crevices, rot and rubble that time, weather and, increasingly, Man have left behind. To discover *wabi-sabi* is to see the singular beauty in transience and what can be more transient than food? Now, imagine

encapsulating all that beauty in a singular chocolate bonbon. Ah, now you begin to understand why Japan and now the world at large has, too, begun a love affair with Janice.

But, Janice's early successes can be attributed to two major unhappy episodes: a head concussion and a failed romance. The former led to a sudden change of heart and, literally, mind as the impact of the accident seemed to awaken her right brain, resulting in the birth of fiery passion and creative energy. The searing pain from the latter led her to find other channels of artistic expression in food, which led to her book writing, her subsequent edible art creations, events catering, and now her foray into food manufacturing. She has built a veritable food empire that bears her name JANICE WONG in bold letters—a daring departure from the Eurocentric, male-dominated names in the food world.

From a little-known national squash player to a burgeoning food entrepreneur to a media-celebrated edible art artist to today's emerging luxury brand owner, Janice has journeyed far. Some may say revenge is a dish best served cold; but for Janice, letting go, getting peace of mind and securing personal success in an increasingly global arena definitely tastes much, much sweeter.

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### **Share with us your background and your influences growing up.**

Very simply—the diversity of the coaches I was exposed to really shaped who I am today. I am continuously pushing myself to do better, to think and be different. That's how we move. There has not been one “normal” day here in the past 11 years and there never will be.

But to take it back to the start, I grew up in Singapore. I was born here and I lived in Chinatown until I was three. Hong Lim Park is very memorable, that was where I would play and hang out with grandma. Hong Lim Hawker Centre still remains, with many of the same vendors even though I have seen two generations come and go. The Hong Lim hawkers have seen me grow up and I recognise a few of them as they

know my parents well. I grew up living with my grandma as my parents were always working. My dad got posted to Japan when I was like one or two. I later joined him between the years of three to seven though he was away for seven to nine years. I came back to Singapore for school and my dad was then posted to Hong Kong.

### **I read that your father was a businessman and an investor.**

He does bond trading. When he was posted to Hong Kong, I went with him as there was a good school there—the Singapore International School.

I was there for the two to three years that he worked there and met many Singaporean kids living in Hong Kong. Most of them have the same story. I guess you could say I was exposed to a great deal of diversity from a young age—different cultures and food. I also had to adapt as a young child to fit into the school system. Unlike the average Singaporean, I had four primary schools, two secondary schools and was always moving around. I said many hellos and goodbyes. I also had to learn to be very independent. I took the public transport in Hong Kong to go play squash at the age of 10 or 11.

My parents were always looking out for me but I was given a lot of freedom. I guess I had a headstart as Hong Kong was very competitive. There were only two classes offered at the primary level in the Singapore International School so you can imagine the competition. Even at that level, I remember having to do my homework and Ten Year Series till midnight. After that, I came back to Singapore to begin my secondary education, and it was just as competitive, if not more. You can say my constant moving around as a kid and having to find my place in new cultures really shaped me.

### **So all your early influences were largely Asian: Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan.**

Correct. I was at the American International School for three years in Japan, and Singapore International School for two years in Hong Kong. I started playing squash at the age of 9, and that also instilled a kind of discipline in me.

**In many ways, you were like a military baby but you are an expatriate kid.**

Yes, so that was my past. Aside from schools, I was also very competitive in sports that exacted discipline and 100% focus. We used to practice hitting the ball at least a hundred times. Squash also required me to wake up early in the morning. I would have my training, then breakfast, and head to the class.

When I was back in Singapore, I went to Methodist Girls' School but I was training for squash intensely—at least once a day. Between junior college and the start of my university, I trained twice a day for the Nationals; we had like 14 competitions a year. I competed in squash until I went to University but I decided to quit after the Asian Championships. I was already in the line-up but I dropped out two months before the competition and they had to do another trial to find my replacement.

**Why did you do that?**

Because I thought I had enough. By then, I played the sport for a decade and felt that I was going nowhere with that. I remember when I was in my first year in Anglo-Chinese Junior College, I trained twice a day for the Singapore Junior Championships in Chennai. It was very tough juggling my studies and squash.

I had to sacrifice a lot of my time and there was very little government support. We would go out and compete but we had to sponsor our trips and tournaments ourselves. It just didn't make sense. You would do your country proud but you had to pay for all your own expenses? Many of us dropped out of squash back then, about 17 years ago, as the government was only keen on investing in football, swimming and table tennis. In contrast, I saw all these amazing athletes around the world being celebrated and supported. They had a well-defined structure and they could make a great career out of sports but Singapore only emphasised academic studies, which is not a bad thing. But as a result, many of us dropped out and went into our second career choices.

But, I didn't stop challenging myself and played nine or 10 different sports while in university. In fact, I also played squash for the varsity championships that required almost no commitment compared to what I was used to doing. I also started to play tennis simply because I wanted a challenge and because I loved it. I also played touch rugby, soccer, badminton, basketball, javelin and tennis.

**So how did your passion for the culinary arts even start?**

After I quit squash, I suddenly had all this time on my hands to explore. I was 20 years old and decided to take the time to travel to Australia while I was a student in NUS (National University of Singapore) and even started learning different languages. I had already taken French in school and even tried studying French and Japanese at the same time. I failed, of course—I had to choose one so I focused on French. That also gave me an insight that there was a learning curve to most new ventures.

Anyway, I was on a six-month programme in Melbourne, Australia. While I was there, I discovered my love for the farms, the culture, fresh produce and ingredients. That was where and when my interest in food all began. I had to feed myself and bought my own groceries. It was also a welcome change from my strict athlete's diet. I started to discover fresh produce and would experiment with cooking.

And then I went to Tasmania to explore the farms, but I met with a car accident the moment I touched down. I smashed my head on the windscreen and there is a scar right here to prove it. I received about 20 stitches and had a skin graft. There were another 30 stitches down my foot. I had many stitches everywhere and that was...

**Life changing.**

Correct. After that, I started to lose my memory. I never recovered, or rather, there are things I can't remember, but it was then that this whole art thing came into my life. I have never been art-trained or art-schooled but for some reason, my brain just switched and I started cooking.

**Do you suffer from short-term memory loss now?**

I will probably not remember your name or the way you look after a year. I tell people I have a bad memory but I'm still praying for its restoration. I am a Christian and my grandfather is a pastor. And I also find it very hard to learn any new languages or anything new for that matter. In the meantime, my life is changing and I wouldn't give this up for anything. I am a very organic person and accept whatever comes or goes. I also became very zen and calm after the accident. My parents initially thought that I had become a totally different person as my temperament changed. I also started painting in 2007, three to four years after the car accident, and started cooking a year after that and decided to open a restaurant.

**Did you quit NUS?**

I wanted to but decided to respect my parents' wishes. Anyway, the other interesting thing about the accident was that I was bestowed the gift of the gab and could do public speaking after I made a full recovery. I used to always get nervous, but now, I am able to give speeches like a train. I could talk and talk and captivate the crowd, and even started doing TED talks and food shows.

**You shared that you started cooking and decided to open a restaurant but there must have been a process. Share with us that story.**

It all started with a strawberry. After I was well, I went back to Melbourne in 2006 to visit a strawberry farm. When I had my first taste of strawberries from the ground, what I tasted was not only sweet and sour, I also savoured the different dimensions of flavours, such as earthiness. I knew I had to recreate these amazing food experiences from Australia back home in Singapore. When I returned, I decided I wanted to open a dessert bar and so I did in 2007.

After NUS, I left for Cordon Bleu in Paris and did a basic course for three months. Instead of continuing with a longer six- or nine-month course, I decided to pursue an internship in a proper kitchen. I knew that

studies were important but I wanted real action, and the best way was to get in the kitchen and start learning from the best chefs. I remember meeting with Justin Quek and asking him how I could get an internship with Les Amis, and Chef Gunther took me in for six months.

In 2006, I also took part in a cooking reality series called Star Chef on Channel 8 and ended up getting placed second in the TV show. It was a three-month process where I had to cook a dish based on a different theme every Sunday. I remember that my brain was so fried, literally. I had to create my recipes, perform my trials over Wednesday, Thursday, Friday; film on Saturday and compete on Sunday. It required a lot of stamina, but that was where my sports experience helped greatly.

Gunther was helping me, loaned me his kitchen and gave me advice. The journey was amazing as I got to push myself to the limit. It was like being on MasterChef and even in that short span of time, I became so much better. I learnt that I had to be mentally prepared, stable, sharp and have no margin for error. There is no space for any failure in my career.

**Share with us what you did after the TV stint.**

I wanted to work as I needed to get respect from the industry. I figured that I was young, female and I would need to lead a team of at least ten. I didn't have the expectation that my team has to be younger than me and be all women. I knew I had to earn respect and create and showcase my unique philosophy. I could not simply burst onto the scene announcing that I want to cook good food. I knew I had to find my philosophy and story.

So after Les Amis, I went back to Melbourne and interned at Fenix, a molecular gastronomy restaurant that has since closed down. Raymond Capaldi was the chef, and when I there, I actually saw plates and pots go flying in the air, and he would swear a lot. There was a lot of fear in the kitchen, so I lasted only one week. After that, I worked for a fortnight in The Botanical.

I was in New York for 90 days till my visa expired, and on the last month, I actually performed two jobs. From 4 p.m. to 1 a.m., I was at a dessert bar, and by morning, I was in Aquavit, Chef Marcus Samuelsson's

place in New York. It's a great restaurant with Swedish influence, and I wanted to learn as much as I could. I had all this curiosity and hunger that I used to have for my sports. I came back to Singapore and headed to Chicago and Spain where I did many different stints. When I returned to Singapore, I opened 2am:dessertbar.

**How did you finance all your travels? Do you think you could have gotten ahead so far so quickly if you had been from a lower-income family?**

From working part-time as a squash coach. I had some savings from my sports grant and was doing a lot of odd jobs that supplemented the travels. It helped, of course, that Dad paid for tuition and also gave me €10,000 for Cordon Bleu and my time in Paris. I relied on my savings to feed myself though I knew Dad would always give if I asked but I never dared ask for more.

**So 2am launched you.**

2am began when I was 24. I wanted to find an edge in pastry making and wanted to think differently. I saw that there was no plated dessert degustation menu in Singapore at that time. It was hard to find a high-level sweets restaurant. I knew I wanted my first restaurant to feature beautiful, plated desserts that you could admire and appreciate. The challenge was that it would be an after-dinner option so it would appeal to a late crowd. We didn't have much of a high tea culture in Singapore back then so I would not have had the tea-time crowd. So it was, of course, very challenging in the beginning.

But Singapore loves fads, so any new place is always successful. It may be misleading at the beginning as you may be up, running and pumping as everybody wants to go to this new place to "check it out" but things may not be so rosy after six months. I am glad the road was always quite smooth for me as we consistently created new dishes and had new ideas. It helps that I am fidgety and did not want to be content with just one menu. Only having one menu is not sustainable in Singapore.

**You became a girl boss by the end of 2007. Share with us more on that journey.**

I had all this ambition and I did it myself. I hired my interior designer to control the construction. It was a nightmare dealing with contractors and screaming matches ensued. I recall our electricity went out on the first day of our soft launch. We had 40 people for a post-wedding celebration on a Sunday, and I was like "Oh my God!"

Partly because my memory does not serve me well, and because my schedule was jam-packed, the years flew by. There is something new every day. After the electricity outage, we shut for a month and reopened in mid-August. All this time, I was paying my lease that was about \$20,000. I was trying to speed up the process and went to PUB (Public Utilities Board) but long story short, I had to wait another month, so our grand opening was not till 10 October, or 1010.

I even handled my own marketing and PR even though I studied Economics and am not trained in that area at all. My first interview was with *8 Days* where I had a two-page spread, and they featured my time in New York. I remember saying that I want to build a brand though I had no real idea what that meant. Today, when interviewers ask me what my vision is in five or ten years, I am able to share in greater detail.

But what I did know was that in business, sustainability is very important. Everybody talks about sustainability but, in Singapore, you can't be fully sustainable as we do not have all the systems in place to recycle. It is way too costly to do all that. So if my focus was business sustainability, then I knew what I needed and had to build a brand.

Today, I have two brands, 2am:dessertbar and JANICE WONG, even though when I started I had no idea what that meant at all. I knew the media loved us as the new kid on the block, so I decided to focus on building PR. Social media was not as crazy as it is today but I decided to start blogs as well as a Facebook page. We had some difficulty telling our story in the beginning but it has certainly changed over time.



## About the Author

Firebrand Dr Loretta Chen is a multi-hyphenate and a tour-de-force: leading creative director, marketing powerhouse, leadership trainer and bestselling author of *Woman on Top: The Art of Smashing Stereotypes and Breaking All the Rules* and *The Elim Chew Story: Driven by Purpose, Destined for Change*.

Chen was the Creative Director of The Activation Group, a turn-key creative agency with offices around Asia. During her 16-year career, she helmed campaigns for luxury and international brands and directed theatrical productions in Asia, the U.S., Canada and the Edinburgh Theatre Festival. She was also the International Consultant to Druk Holdings and Investments (DHI), the government investment arm of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

She holds a Doctorate in Philosophy and a Certificate in Leadership from Harvard University. She is a Visiting Professor and Guest Speaker in numerous institutions including Stanford University, University of Hawaii, University of Southern Maine and the Colegio de San Juan de Letran in the Philippines. She is also Adjunct Professor at Argosy University and Leeward Community College.

Other career highlights include having her eponymous radio show on Lush 99.5FM, instituting a Young Designer's Scholarship at Raffles Design Institute and being voted one of Asia's Most Inspiring Women. Her entrepreneurial ventures include design agency The Barefoot Group, the world's first TCM wearable device by Kang Healthcare and Our Green Tara, a leadership and coaching outfit. Chen also worked with innovative automobile and clean energy company, Tesla.

Chen believes in compassion, karma and loves the mountains, oceans and taking on unknown adventures. She is living her dream and now resides in Hawaii with her husband and three cats.

*Madonnas and Mavericks* marks her third book with Marshall Cavendish.

For enquiries and collaborations, log on to [www.drlorettachen.com](http://www.drlorettachen.com).