

SALT & LIGHT

Inspirational Stories
of Faith at Work



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Inspirational Stories
of Faith at Work

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Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Printed in Singapore

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Work

When SARS pushed an infectious diseases doctor toward God



Photo by John Crawford, National Institute of Health on Flickr

An epidemic that caused a national crisis and international alarm? Hardly anyone would consider *that* an intervention of grace by a sovereign God.

But 48-year-old infectious diseases specialist and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) victim, Dr Leong Hoe Nam, is not just *anyone*; he is a man whose excruciating experience with SARS while quarantined in Germany was a key step towards knowing his Father's love.

Many of us would remember 2003 as the year of SARS. Stories of the shared experiences in pain and joy have been told; the actions of heroes honoured, the lives of victims remembered. But Dr Leong's remarkable story towards God is one that few have heard.

A MYSTERIOUS DISEASE

In 2003, Dr Leong and his wife, Dr Lim Hong Huay, were infected with SARS and quarantined in Frankfurt, Germany, for two-and-a-half weeks.

It turned out that Dr Leong had contracted the virus while treating the first SARS patient in Singapore – “patient no. 1”. He happened to be the infectious diseases doctor on-call the day she was admitted. At the time, her illness was a mystery.

No one knew about SARS then. The working diagnosis of her illness was “atypical pneumonia” – which only meant that she had an unknown lung infection.

But Dr Leong came down with a high fever and severe body pain – symptoms he attributed to dengue. After plenty of rest and fluids, his fever subsided. So he and his wife decided to go ahead with their plans to attend a conference in New York. Two days into his trip, he fell ill again.

This time, it was he who was diagnosed with “atypical pneumonia”.

Before Dr Leong and his wife left for Singapore, he called a trusted colleague in Singapore to update him on his condition. By then, patient no. 1's illness had been identified and the term “SARS” had just been coined.

Unbeknownst to him, Dr Leong's phone call would set off a chain reaction which eventually led to his being quarantined in Frankfurt, Germany.

SUFFERING THROUGH SARS

Dr Leong suffered badly from the effects of the SARS virus. He recalled: “I had to cope with hacking bouts of cough. Every single attempt to adjust my posture would result in my coughing out blood.”

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Even breathing was difficult. “One evening, I tried to take deeper and deeper breaths but to no avail. I felt suffocated – as if the air had no oxygen – even though I had on a full-face 100% oxygen mask.

“The sensation of breathlessness was terrifying.”

He said: “I was not a Christian then but I was not afraid of death, because all of us will die. I just knew I had to avoid mechanical ventilation if I wanted to keep the odds in my favour.”

A LOVE THAT PURSUES

He soon overcame the virus and started to recover. But he faced a bigger problem: Inactivity.

Dr Leong, a self-declared workaholic, was stuck in a German hospital with nothing to stimulate his active mind. He was someone who needed to be doing or reading something *constantly*.

“I’m busy. *Always* busy. Work to me is like cheese to a rat. Give me work, I will do. Give me a treadmill, I will run.”

“That Bible was the only English text that I could get my hands on.”

Back in 2003, mobile phones were still rudimentary and most people still used a dial-up connection for the Internet. Getting hold of something to read in English was almost impossible. The Winter Olympics was showing on the television, but there was only so much figure skating he could endure watching.

But his wife, who was a very young Christian then, had gotten hold of an English bible. She asked him to read it since there was not much else to do.

Today, Dr Leong laughs as he recalls his desperation: “I was a reasonably fervent believer of another faith, but that Bible was the only English text that I could get my hands on!”

His wife suggested that he start with the Gospel of Luke since they were both physicians, as was Luke. Dr Leong obliged, even

though he says now that he thinks the Gospel of John would have been a much easier to start with.

By the time he was done, Dr Leong was confronted with the person of Jesus: “Jesus was either an incredibly charismatic and influential leader with a bunch of fools for followers, or there is indeed a true God and Jesus *is* the Son of God.”

Dr Leong could not decide if the God of the Bible was real ... or not.

He and his wife eventually returned to Singapore and fought in the ongoing battle of the SARS crisis.

On May 31, 2003, Singapore was declared SARS-free, and life went back to normal for the couple. Dr Leong was not yet convinced of God’s truth. But he felt no pressing reason to resolve this puzzle, so the question was left unanswered.

FINDING GOD

In 2004, Dr Leong moved to London to pursue his PhD. Life was good: Unlike his life in Singapore, he now had a lot of time on his hands. Weekend road trips out of the city were the norm.

“If I had to go through SARS a hundred times over just to know the God whom I love, I’d do it.”

At the insistence of his wife, they found the Chinese Church In London and joined a cell group. Back in Singapore, when Dr Lim first started attending church, Dr Leong had thought it was a complete waste of time. “I detested it because Sunday mornings were my precious mornings off!”

But in London, Dr Leong did not mind attending church and cell group together. In fact, he made friends with a cell member named Marcus Andrew, whose wife was a doctor.

Andrew answered many of Dr Leong’s questions about the faith and directed him to resources on Christianity as well.

This became a crucial foundation that set the stage for his eventual conversion.

In 2006, Dr Leong was having trouble in his research – his experiments just weren't working out. And to make matters worse, he could not find anyone to ask for advice and guidance. He was well and truly stuck.

“I literally felt the warmth of God's presence.”

By then, Dr Leong had heard enough about God that he decided to pray and ask for help with his work. “God, help me get my experiments working. Just help me.”

Nothing happened.

Dr Leong started to get frustrated, but he kept praying. Eventually, he started to bargain with God: “OK God, I'll do it Your way. Whatever You want, I will do. But You *really* need to help me with this.”

Still nothing.

Then one day, as Dr Leong was walking from the tube at Hampstead station towards his college, he prayed a different prayer.

“That's it. God, come what may, I submit to You. If the experiments work, then they work. If they don't work, I *still* submit to Your authority in my life.”

“God's hand is on my work now. Without Him, all the work that I do would be useless.”

Suddenly, he was embraced by God. “I literally felt the warmth of God's presence. He was hugging me! God said to me, ‘You are my son, you are my beloved son.’ And all my stress and anxiety about work, everything, just melted away.”

Dr Leong remembers this thought clearly: “OK, it doesn't matter. Whether my experiment succeeds or not, it doesn't matter. I've got

God with me now.”

TWO STEPS TO FAITH

Looking back on his journey to faith, Dr Leong surmises: “If I hadn't been infected with SARS, I wouldn't have read the Bible. If I hadn't gotten away from work in Singapore, I wouldn't have known God.”

He says that he is often asked if he has any regrets about SARS. The benefit of hindsight is not lost on him; time has passed but the experience is still fresh in his mind.

He takes a moment to compose himself before replying: “God is very, very, very dear to me. If I had to go through SARS a hundred times over just to know the God whom I love, I'd do it.”

He recognises the painful experience of SARS as a necessary intervention and milestone in his personal journey. “If God hadn't taken me away from the distractions of work, I would never have read the Gospel of Luke.”

And if he had not read the Gospel of Luke, he would never have been confronted with Jesus.

Many might believe that science and God do not mix. But while Dr Leong works hard at keeping abreast of new developments in science, he leaves room for God to intervene and guide him through every case that he takes on.

In fact, he relies on God's guidance to the extent that his colleagues have been known to say that he “performs miracles” on his patients. Dr Leong attributes the good work he does to God, clarifying that it is not his brilliance but, rather, fruits of his obedience to the promptings of God.

“God's hand is on my work now. Without Him, all the work that I do would be useless.”



Dr Leong in his office at Rophi Clinic; “rophi” is a Hebrew word which means “to heal”

◆ Text by Tan Huey Ying

Work

Banking head honcho now works with villagers and ex-convicts



Alex with his wife Channy and children on holiday Photo by Alex Tee

He speaks deliberately, his words measured, pausing often to weigh his thoughts.

At 39 going on 40, Alex Tee could have been at the proverbial epitome of his career in the heady world of banking and finance.

This is where the script changes.

TIDE TURNED

Earlier this year he left his job as Managing Director and the Chief Executive of Bank of America, Singapore.

Tee did not just walk away from his job, he walked away from the banking industry altogether, leaving his high finance career well behind him.

“I really wanted the stewardship to start now ... not when my best years are behind me.”

It's a radical move in a world consumed by the money chase. For Tee, this about-turn began with a conversation about five years ago.

“Isaiah 61 distinguishes between prisoners and captives. I asked the Lord: ‘What’s the difference? Both need to be freed.’

“And the Lord said: ‘The captives are people like you who, because of that financial security, would not step out. And all the time, you know that this is not really *life* but you still continue clipping these fat, chunky financial coupons.’”

That set his mind thinking, but he put the conversation on the back burner.

Though it was shelved, it was never forgotten.

Tee came to Singapore as a pre-teen to further his education.

His father's business was doing well in Banting, a small town about 45 minutes drive from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The family sent the eldest child down south to Singapore for a better start in life.



Tee's siblings together with their spouses and mum (centre back). Jimmy, on the extreme right, is the youngest and practising to be a surgeon. Without Tee's season in banking, the family wouldn't have had the means to put him through medical school.

However, within a couple of years, his parent's business failed and chalked up debts.

By then, Tee was awarded an Asean Scholarship, but the money situation remained tight, right up to university.

That episode left an indelible mark on Tee.

SETTING THE HOUSE IN ORDER

So leaving a successful financial career was no light decision – there were also present needs he was already committed to.

As the eldest of five children, Tee helped to finance his younger siblings' education and was also shouldering some of the financial burden of his extended family.

At the same time, he was just starting a family of his own and there were provisions to be made.

“What really touched me is Luke 9:23-24 – those who lose their life will gain it.”

“I needed to acquire financial authority fairly quickly, I saw the whole season in banking as God's providence, to open up this span of time to help me do so.”

That season of preparation also gave him time to have more conversations with the Lord about his work situation: “It's the time of secret prayer that Jesus calls for, really growing deep and having a real joy to commune with the Lord. That place has granted me a lot of peace.”

Just when he was planning his exit, Tee got promoted to the position of Managing Director of Bank of America, Singapore.

POVERTY OF PURPOSE

However, his heart was set on obedience to His call.

“Using the Bible as reference, I recognised that even if I succeeded wildly and went on to head Asia, I would have succeeded at the wrong thing. I didn't want to realise this only at 50 or 60

years old, when my best years are behind me. I really wanted the stewardship to start now.

“I no longer have that constant nagging sense that the work of these hands will not matter for eternity.”

“What also really got me to make the switch is the recognition that, in banking, there is an appearance of flourishing. Even though you are financially abundant, there may be a poverty of purpose. People who have been in it long enough may recognise that.”

Even so, not many make the move.

In the realm of high finance, taking risks and moving into new investment positions are daily assignments for bankers.

The irony is, when risk becomes a personal affair, many turn averse and rather not venture or wager. Perhaps, the smell of certain money and success is too intoxicating.



Tee (extreme right) and his team when the office moved to a spanking new building at OUE Bayfront.

KINGDOM PURPOSED

Tee, who had spent more than a decade climbing the ladder in high finance, gave it all away for a smaller investment portfolio.

Today, he is Chief Operating Officer at Garden Impact, an investment company which backs small enterprises that provide jobs mostly for the poor and the marginalised. *(Update: Tee has since left Garden Impact Investments and is now a homeschooling father who continues to make direct investments into companies using market solutions to alleviate poverty.)*

It focuses not only on the financial bottomline, but the well-being of the community as well.

“God’s heart is for the poor and people who cannot help themselves. These communities simply need to be connected to the value chains. Without somebody coming in to link them into those chains, they have very little hope.

“Our utmost wish and dream is to be able to fulfil the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) by obeying the Great Commandment to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:36-40).”

Instead of hobnobbing with clients in swanky restaurants, Tee now meets entrepreneurs in sweaty, regional, far-flung places to help them scale up their operations and provide for communities with needs.

“Sacrifices, servanthood, the abundant life – if they are not embodied, there is a risk they remain abstract.”

Tee’s face lights up when he talks about the different projects he is working on: “I really love to create flourishing communities and see people succeed. If we talk about flourishing communities, that’s another way of saying ‘the abundant life’.”

It is but early days yet for Tee and his career change of less than a year. His family has had to live more simply on his current, more modest income. When asked if there was even a chance he’d consider returning to the high-octane world of finance – it was a resounding ‘No’ for an answer.

“No chance,” he says firmly.

“You are right that it is a radical shift. For example, the salary I am on now is sort of a rounding error compared to what I used to be on. But I no longer have that constant nagging sense that the work of these hands will not matter for eternity.

“If the Bible is the sole authority of how we must live our lives then I’m not going back. What really touched me is Luke 9:23-24 – those who try to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life will gain it.”



On holiday with his wife, Channy, and children, Eli, Emin and Ena.

PUTTING FAITH TO WORK

Tee is also part of the new breed of younger fathers realigning their lives and values to a higher purpose – not just for themselves, but the next generation as well.

“The biggest reason, and a lot of it, is modelling for the children. They need to know what daddy does. I love to bring home these conversations and tell them about the businesses that we invest in. I love to bring them along the journey; I think that’s the only way to develop empathy for people.

“Many values that we talk about – sacrifices, servanthood and the abundant life – if they are not embodied, there is always the risk that they just remain in their theological realm ... abstract.

“My hope is that the Lord will use all of this – five loaves and two fish – and inspire others who are captive in the industry, battling that poverty of purpose, to simply walk out and seek a life that is really life.”

◆Text by Karen Tan

Work

Her darkest moments prepared F&B CEO Jocelyn Chng to steer through COVID-19



During the current economic uncertainty of COVID-19, business decisions that once drew criticism have turned into lifelines for Chng's companies. "I don't know the purpose (of COVID), but I fear nothing because He says He will never leave nor forsake us." (Hebrews 13:5) All photos courtesy of Jocelyn Chng.

At age 21, she lost her father. At 37, she was widowed – just eight months after her beloved grandmother passed on suddenly. Naysayers disparaged her abilities and innovations. Contractors made off with her money. She also saw the ravages of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) on her business.

It's an understatement to say that F&B CEO Jocelyn Chng has experienced more than her fair share of life challenges in her 53 years.

She was just a second-year student at the National University of Singapore when her father passed away after a prolonged battle with colon cancer. While juggling studies, she took over the flailing family business to help her mum feed her five siblings.

But she sees redemption in each soul-wrenching episode.



Award-winning businesswoman Jocelyn Chng has seen God's grace in pulling her out of her deepest hours of loss and pain.

"I don't know the purpose but I fear nothing because He says: 'I am with you always.'"

"God showed a lot of mercy and grace. He helped me pull through. As I was seeing the impossible, God reminded me He was there in my darkest moment," said Chng, managing director of Sin Hwa Dee, known for its sauces and cooking mixes. She is also CEO of JR Group, an international food manufacturing and F&B company she started with her late husband.

She knows God will be no different in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

She looks to the bible verse in her room: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

"I don't know the purpose, but I fear nothing because He says: 'I am with you always'.

"As I'm telling you this, tears are rolling down because I've really experienced this again and again," she told *Salt&Light*.

INNOVATIVE LIFELINES

During the current economic uncertainty of COVID-19, Chng's business decisions that once drew detractors have turned into

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lifelines for her companies. In particular, her hot food vending machine business.

“People didn’t believe in it. But I kept believing the vision even when they didn’t.”



Jocelyn with husband Richard and their three sons (*left to right*) Joel, Emmanuel, and Noel. Their sons are now 22, 18 and 25 respectively. Richard passed away in February 2004.

In 2003, while at a trade fair, her late husband Richard Wong caught on to the idea of bringing hot food vending machines to Singapore.

In 2016 – more than a decade later – Chng opened Singapore’s first vending machine café with a cluster of six vending machines that dispensed everything from drinks and snacks to cooked meals and desserts.

In the years between genesis and fruition of her husband’s dream, Chng

lost him to lymphoma – within two weeks of being diagnosed.

Critics did not think hot food vending machines were sustainable on an island with an abundance of hawker centres, food courts and restaurants.

“When God opens doors, everything falls into place.”

Chng had to convince manufacturers, solution providers and customers because the idea was so far out of the box.

“It was so hard for 10 years. People didn’t believe in it. But I kept believing the vision even when they didn’t,” said Chng.

She did not know it then, but God was preparing her business for the current economic downturn. No doubt, the months since the coronavirus hit Singapore’s shores have been difficult for Chng. But she maintains that they have been “exciting times”.

“With eateries only doing takeouts and deliveries so expensive, people have been turning to our vending machines.

“Because of the better-than-expected business from the vending machines, we are able to get a lot of new insights into customer taste and eating patterns based on what foods they pick.

“A lot of people say: ‘Wah, you got vision!’ How can I say I have vision? ... it was God who gave the vision.”

“We are experiencing so many new things which we have not done before.”

There has also been an increase in demand for the JR Group’s other offerings as Singapore hunkered down to eating and cooking at home. They include Chef-in-Box cooked and chilled meals that can be easily heated, as well as Sin Hwa Dee’s range of sauces and mixes.

The ready-to-eat meals were also part of Wong’s vision. He had wanted to supply these not just to homes, but to hotels, restaurants and caterers as well.

“When the Circuit Breaker happened and restaurants and eateries could only offer takeout, they bought from us because many of them have limited staff and no central kitchen.”

“The diversification has helped us,” said Chng of the increase in demand for these products even as the catering and restaurant arms of her business are affected.



The JR Group’s hot food vending machines in HDB estates are bringing in 30% to 50% more business during the season when people can no longer dine out. The ones in offices and schools have been dormant.



Jocelyn realised her dream of feeding thousands during the Circuit Breaker through heat-and-serve ready-meals.

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"A lot of people say: 'Wah, you got vision!' How can I say I have vision? At that time, it was God who gave the vision.

"Now, I am seeing that it was paving the way for us to survive in this situation. It is all God's plan.

"It's very scary," she said of how wonderfully God has pulled everything together.

FOOD NETWORK

Known in the industry to be genuine, caring and friendly, Chng has always made it a point to build relationships with customers and employees. These contacts have been invaluable to her business during this season.



Migrant workers receive their ready-meals.



Ready-meals being dropped off at the door of someone under quarantine.

"During this crisis, I have friends calling me and asking me to cook meals for workers in the dormitories. I happen to have two Indian chefs. So I asked if they could provide suitable meals." They could.

"Another friend asked me to prepare lunches for children who had to return to school during home-based learning. Then, a partner asked us to provide meals for those being quarantined."

Friends have also been coming forward to donate meals to those in homes and shelters and getting Chng's company to prepare the food.

On her part, she offers a special discount for all sponsored meals.

"When God opens doors, everything falls into place."

"We have always wanted to supply meals to thousands. Today, we are feeding thousands."

Years before, Chng had a dream. In it, she saw herself feeding thousands much like Jesus did with five loaves and two fishes in the Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14).

It was just shortly after her husband passed away. Chng did not quite understand what it meant, but it placed a seed of desire in her heart.

"We have always wanted to supply meals to thousands. Today, we are feeding thousands," said Chng.

"And we already had ingredients in our warehouse because we were preparing for Chef-in-Box."

Her 300-strong staff, too, have taken well to this season of challenges and change.

"We spoke to the restaurant staff: 'Can you come back to the central kitchen and work? The job may be different. You may no longer be a service staff but a packer; you used to be a Japanese chef but now you have to cook rice instead.'

"They understand and they continue to work and we continue to pay them. We don't lay off anyone because they still need the job.

"It's a bit tough for the company. We don't slash their pay even if the job scope changes. We are trying to ride through the storm."

LESSONS IN LOSS

It's not the first time that Chng has had to ride through a storm created by a viral outbreak.

"I don't understand God's wisdom, but I trust His will."

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"During SARS in 2003, I was fighting the battle quite alone because my sister, Kathleen, whom I now work very closely with was due to deliver her firstborn."

Chng's other siblings were too young to help in the business. "They don't even remember the SARS episode."

Even worse, her maternal grandmother passed on in April of that year. Chng was especially close to her. When her parents lost their jobs and started a small business to make ends meet, Chng's grandparents cared for her. She was just 11 years old, the eldest of six children.

Then, less than a year after her grandmother's passing, her husband died.

Chng believes the losses offer lessons that will fortify her for this season.

"I keep a prayer journal. Things that I saw as dead ends have turned around because with God nothing is impossible". (Matthew 19:26)

"I believe everything that happens has a reason. (Romans 8:28) This has kept me going."

KEEPING THE FAITH

Chng clung on to these verses when her two older sons fell ill with high fevers during the COVID-19 period.

"It started with Joel. His fever was so high he had to be warded in a hospital."



Jocelyn with her sons (left to right) Joel, Emmanuel and Noel.

Joel had just returned from the United Kingdom and the family feared he had contracted COVID-19. It turned out to be a bacterial infection. He has since recovered.

Then his older brother Noel got very sick. "His fever went on for days and it was so high, almost 40 degrees," said Chng.

Again, the family feared that it was COVID-19. They sent him to the hospital.

"Things that I saw as dead ends have turned around because with God nothing is impossible."

"It turned out to be dengue. But because of the COVID-19 situation, I couldn't even visit him. His blood platelet count dropped to 12,000 when the normal range is between 150,000 to 450,000.

"He was so weak he couldn't even pick up the phone to reply my texts." The family prayed for him through their chat group.

Noel, too, has since recovered.

Through it all, Chng holds unwaveringly to the one big lesson she had learnt through her life. And which she believes will tide her through this pandemic: "God always has a purpose. We just have to wait for his timing.

It's just a matter of time before it is all over, says Chng of the pandemic. "I don't understand God's wisdom, but I trust His will."

◆Text by Christine Leow

Leadership

“I’m really proud of our miracle nation”: NVPC’s Melissa Kwee on her dreams for a City of Good



Melissa Kwee has headed the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) since 2014. Picture by Tan Huey Ying

Melissa Kwee is a scion of the Pontiac Land Group family, real estate developers and owners of luxury hotels such as The Capella Singapore, famous for being the location of the historic Trump-Kim Summit in June 2018.

Yet instead of opting for a life of glitz and glamour, Kwee has chosen to give her time and efforts back to the community.

Kwee is the CEO of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), a non-profit organisation promoting a giving culture in Singapore in an effort to build a City of Good.

This is not her first role in community work. Melissa had plunged straight into social entrepreneurship right after university.

The anthropology graduate from Harvard University was awarded the Singapore Youth Award in 2007 and Asean Youth Award 2008 for her leadership and service in that sector.

Salt&Light sat down with Kwee to hear her vision of Singapore as a City of Good.

YOU HAVE BEEN IN PHILANTHROPY FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES – WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR INSPIRATION?

Growing up, I saw my maternal grandparents being very engaged in community always, and eventually making the decision to give pretty much all their wealth to the community.

The school I went to also had a real emphasis on raising citizens who are socially conscious, environmentally aware and politically engaged.

The people I meet also inspire me. I try and hold, front and centre, the idea that you can learn something from anyone if you are open and curious.

I’m more of a spontaneous, go-with-the-flow type of person. I just trust that, if you’re really asking God to show you His will, and if you want to be in God’s will, then you just have to keep moving.

And until doors start closing, or things start falling apart, or when you have the conviction that you are walking down the wrong path, you just keep tuning in.

As a child of God, it is also important for me to be a peacemaker (Matthew 5:9).



In 2018, Melissa Kwee was appointed a Justice of the Peace.



To help teenage girls on probation reintegrate into society, Melissa Kwee co-founded Beautiful People, initially a ground-up programme of Beyond Social Services, which pairs mentors with teenage girls to offer guidance, life skills and friendship. This has become more than a volunteer role for her, this is now family.

OVER THE YEARS, HAVE YOU SEEN SINGAPOREANS BECOME BETTER AT GIVING?

Giving has changed because of demographics and changing life experiences.

There is a strong wave of millennials who are looking for causes to get behind and for ways to make a difference. They see the different problems in society and want to do something about it. Many want to work for companies that do good; others want to start social enterprises.

You also see a demographic shift with the first generation of older adults who are educated, aware and have leisure time, want to be relevant and make a contribution,

We're also more globally connected and people are more aware of big issues like climate change – and people seeking to make a difference with small lifestyle changes. Small things ultimately add up. We are also talking more about taboo issues like mental health and social isolation. It can happen to anyone of us.

WHEN WE THINK OF SINGAPOREANS, A GIVING PEOPLE DOES NOT COME TO MIND. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

That's why we have to articulate an alternative narrative, to have a different definition of who we are as a people!

Giving is defined, not just as the act of volunteering or the sharing, but *who we are*. It is also about having a spirit of being other-centred.

So at National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, we have a goal to establish the identity of Singaporeans as a giving people, as a giving nation, where goodness is part of who we are.

A “city of good” narrative is where people, organisations, businesses as well as leaders who come together to give their best for others.

HOW FAR ARE WE FROM BECOMING A CITY OF GOOD?

In my mind, I use the Kingdom of God as the dynamic – because it is in you, it is coming, it is now. It's beyond time and space but it is accessible to everyone.

The whole point is for each person to discover that gift and talent within. That value within can only be realised in the giving, because things of value isn't realised unless it's given.

We try to help everyone see that it is within their realm to do good. And if it begins in the family, that's a good start. If you can extend that to your neighbour, colleagues or schoolmates, that's terrific.



In 2018, NVPC launched the SG Cares app, which makes volunteering and donating to charity easier for Singaporeans. It rides off data from giving.sg. Our dream was to make giving part of everyday life – and we clearly need platforms and partners to make that happen, said Kwee.

Many people believe that it's so hard or it requires so much commitment – but it's really just the micro movements and the habits that we cultivate every day.

WHAT DO SINGAPOREANS FIND HARDEST TO GIVE?

Time is always the most difficult to give.

I remember my dean at Harvard said he hoped we'd never become the people from whom it is easier to get \$5 from, than five minutes of our time.

“Time is always the most difficult to give.”

It's this whole scarcity-of-time perception. Time is a function of prioritie. So the question is: What's your priority?

If you want companies of good, then managements need to support their employees to participate and be citizens of the community, because it will build teams and develop a sense of common cause within the company.

Purpose drives people, and people drive companies.

WHAT IS THE HARDEST PART OF YOUR JOB?

I believe that human beings ultimately want to do the right thing. Nobody sets out wanting to be selfish or evil. Everybody wants to do good and be proud of what they do.

But we also operate in a system that tends to be quite win-lose and very harsh on failure. The perception of failure is to receive judgement.

The sense of failing or losing out is such a strong cultural belief that it often causes people to become selfish, territorial, judgmental and self-righteous.

When people don't put the welfare of others first, when they don't take a step back and see what is the common good but pursue exclusively a narrow private interest, that's ultimately where things fall apart.



A group of Singapore filmmakers and online creators produced 15 short films based on real-life Singaporean stories from the early 1970s to the late 1990s.



Melissa Kwee with Daniel Yun (Blue3Asia) at Filmgarde Cineplexes. *15 Shorts* was a collaboration between NVPC and Blue3Asia. Early in her career, Melissa Kwee started Project Access, a values-based leadership education initiative to inspire and equip girls and young women to be role models for positive change.

SO HOW DO YOU OVERCOME THAT?

First of all, I believe it starts by having the opposite spirit, and modelling the generosity of spirit.

First of all, I always think we have the choice to love or judge.

In facing selfishness, I believe it starts by having the opposite spirit, and modelling a generosity of spirit.

It is not about cursing the darkness but lighting a light.

For example, *15 Shorts*, a collaboration between the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) and Blue3Asia, features real people's stories told through short films.

What's strategic? It's the focus on local Singaporeans. That helps to expand our understanding of Singapore's social history.

Otherwise, Singapore's history is either told in an economic sense or political self-determination perspective. It's not told as a people's history.

*“It is not about cursing the darkness
but lighting a light.”*

Creatives today are our prophets – they shape the public mindset and cast attention shows what can be achieved through caring and sacrificing for others.

We want to use content to stimulate positive action, so after watching the clips on-line, viewers can also click through to giving.sg, to connect to a cause and make a difference.

PEOPLE CAN GET DULL OF HEARING THE CALL TO GIVE AND VOLUNTEER – HOW DO YOU PREVENT THIS COMPASSION FATIGUE?

I think I'm wiser now to discern what programmes are more likely to have impact, and what is just a lot of activity with nice packaging.

For young people especially, and those who are just starting out, you want to encourage them. You want to encourage their sense of purpose and wanting to be a contribution. So, I don't really ever discourage people from wanting to do that.

Sometimes, it's about managing the expectation of how much they are going to achieve and how quickly they will reach their goal. It's also about encouraging them to stay in the game rather than becoming too ambitious, and then become terribly disappointed and falling away.

I always look for people who are willing to learn, and are open-minded.

WHERE DO YOU ENVISAGE SINGAPORE IN THE NEXT 50 YEARS?

Honestly, I think Singapore is an amazing place. I'm really proud of this miracle nation.

"I think sometimes we don't dream enough."

I think sometimes we don't dream enough. We kill ideas because when we don't know how to do them, we do not spend enough time considering whether it's worth trying. Purpose not just practicality should be used to evaluate ideas.

Pragmatism is actually a gift, being practical helps translate things into a working model but it can become a hindrance when you limited your imagination.



The recipients of the President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards 2018

If we lose our ability to dream, we lose our edge in creating a better world.

We're not perfect, but as a city, because of our level of development, investment in infrastructure and the relative stability, I think we have a potential to really accelerate urban social innovation for the benefit of all members of our community.

◆Text by Karen Tan