

PEOPLE

We're young, crazy and adventurous

She could have had it all.

At 25, Dr Tam Wai Jia was poised for success – fresh out of medical school, she had been accepted by Johns Hopkins University to do her Masters in Public Health.

She had also been awarded the Young Outstanding Singaporean Award 2011.

Dr Tam says: “I was determined to be rich and successful.”

Yet today, at 27, she is about to leave for Uganda, where she will be looking after some of the sickest and poorest.

She reveals she was inspired by her husband, Mr Cliff Tam, 34, a missionary.

“Cliff is a liver cancer survivor. He made me realise the brevity of life,” she explains.

The couple had donated their entire wedding hongbao of \$50,000 to an anti-human trafficking ministry called Daughters of Cambodia. The money was used to build a guest house for rescued girls.

The medical officer acknowledges she has chosen a path that is radically different from her peers’.

“This is my handbag,” she says with a laugh, gesturing at a plain paper bag which holds her belongings. “I have a lot of classmates who carry Coach, Kate Spade, but can you carry that with you when you die?”

She has also begun to sell off her belongings as she lives in a rented house and will not have a place to keep her things while she is overseas.

The couple plan to rely on donations from their church to get by in Uganda.

Acknowledging that they have not raised enough as yet, she says simply that they will be “going forth in faith”.

“We’re crazy, young and adventurous – we wanted a place that would be uncomfortable.”

As a doctor, however, she is well aware of the risks the two are taking.

“There is a high risk of getting Yellow Fever (a viral disease spread by infected mosquitoes) there,” she says, her mood sobering.

As her husband has had a liver transplant, he is unable to get vaccinated against the disease. After “many tear-wrung discussions”, the pair decided to make the trip anyway.

With tears in her eyes, she recalls: “We asked each other, ‘Have you counted the

cost? What if you die? What if I die?’

“But we feel it is worth it. We have both already written our wills.”

Dr Tam is no stranger to charity. At 18, she wrote a book to raise funds for orphans she had encountered while on a mission trip to Nepal.

She says: “They had to keep moving because the orphanage had no money to house them permanently. I told myself I had to get these children a home.”

The book, *Kitesong*, raised more than \$100,000. The money went to build a permanent orphanage. Since then, she has published two other books and is working on her fourth.

With a distant gaze, Dr Tam confesses: “At times, I feel a sense of overwhelming loss.

“After graduation everyone is racing to specialise in a field, and at one point I felt like everything I strived for (in school) had been wasted.

“But when you focus, you realise that

what really matters cannot be bought with status or money – your memories, experiences and contributions.”

She says modestly: “I’m not a saint. I struggle like anybody else, but when it comes down to what’s important in life – if one day you’re faced with death, will you be able to look back and say, ‘I have lived my life in a way that counts in eternity?’”

Asked what she would say to people who aspire to take the same path, she says: “Young people are very passionate about helping and very civic-conscious.

“But there’s a gap between what we want to do and how we live our lives.”

Dr Tam and her husband will leave in a few months for Uganda to be based there for a year, before having to return to serve her bond with the Government, but she hopes that her stay overseas can be extended as “it takes some time to impact a community”.

What about her Masters programme?

“It has been put on hold so that we can focus on what’s really important,” she says.

She intends to take life “step by step”.

She says with a smile: “As long as we’re faithful to what we do, the rest will be taken care of.”



LEAP OF FAITH:
Dr Tam Wai Jia.

TNP PICTURE:
ARIFFIN JAMAR

