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CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS OF 2011!



an interview with Wai Jia

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Tan Wai Jia (YLLSoM Class of 2011), is a young doctor who is actively involved in community service, numerous humanitarian projects and mission trips overseas. She was recently a recipient of the 2011 Young Outstanding Singaporean Award. Besides her love for medicine and reaching out to others, Wai Jia is also a recognized tri-athlete and enjoys biking, swimming, painting and writing, and has published two picture books in support of various causes.

The Auricle had the privilege of speaking to Wai Jia on receiving this prestigious award and here we present what she has to share about herself and her efforts.

The Auricle (A): Congratulations on being a recipient of the 2011 Young Outstanding Singaporean Award! The Auricle understands this was in recognition of your community service and humanitarian efforts in Nepal and other similar countries. Could you share a little about your efforts thus far- perhaps major projects that you have undertaken and how things are currently going?

Wai Jia (W): Thank you, the award was really unexpected.

My first major project started 5 years ago just before I entered medical school. After my A-levels, I took a 6-week solo trip to visit an orphanage in Kathmandu, Nepal. Staying with the orphans, and seeing how the missionaries poured out their lives to help underprivileged children, I was inspired and challenged to share what I had seen and heard back home here, and to make a difference to their community. Seeing how those children, like us, have dreams for a better future but were limited by their poverty, moved me deeply.

On returning from Nepal, my first picture book *Kitesong* was born. It was illustrated and written to raise funds for needy children in Nepal and to build a new Home for them, since the children were forced to shift homes frequently due to high rental costs. The success of the project to raise more than \$110'000 within a few months was not due to my own "capability" but as a result of the collective effort from the strong support of a publisher I met, the Methodist Mission Society and many generous and compassionate donors. The cost of printing the books were fully sponsored such that no part of the donations collected went to cover any printing costs.

Later on, my publisher's wife sponsored the production of the DVD version of the books, which was used to raise awareness and funds for needy children and youth in other developing countries such as China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. You may view the animated version of the book and find out more at www.kitesong.sg.

Since then, I've been travelling to developing countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka etc on similar trips during my breaks in medical school. I've just returned from Africa and truly, the poor and the underprivileged continually teach and bless me much more than I ever bless them.

My most recent project involves the publishing of my second picture book entitled "A Taste of Rainbow", which is distributed freely in national libraries, Singapore General Hospital Life Centre, Kinokuniya, and various counselling centres as part of a public education project to raise awareness of eating disorders and depression, especially among youth. In time, it will also be rolled out to teach self-esteem in students in secondary schools. You may read the book at www.kitesong.sg/atasteofrainbow or refer someone in need to the website for resources.

A: What was it that first motivated you to start to actively reach out to help the less fortunate and what is it that keeps you going? Many people join community service projects but surely it takes a certain special motivation that inspires you to persevere and devote so much effort despite your numerous commitments in and out of medical school.

W: My first exposure to humanitarian work began in Junior College, when I went on a 3-week Youth Expedition trip to Cambodia with my alma mater to paint a school. That first exposure to humanitarian work was a very rewarding experience.

Each time I go on a mission trip, what the poor and needy bless me with - gifts of contentment, gratitude and humility, often impact me deeply and spur me on to want to give back to them.

My faith also plays an important part, as I believe being involved in mission work and loving the poor and needy is God's call upon my life. My dream is to be a medical missionary someday.

A: Is there a specific ultimate goal that you hope to be able to reach or achieve through your efforts, for the people you are helping or that you have set for yourself?

W: Yes. My dream is to reach out to and impact lives in rural and developing settings, through public health and surgery. It is my hope that through loving and being with the poor, we can help them to help themselves. Another dream in my heart is to spread this vision of helping the poor to my community here, and to continually challenge and inspire youth to step out to make a difference to the less fortunate, both in and out of Singapore.

A: Besides your efforts in Nepal and in other overseas humanitarian efforts, you have also published an inspirational watercolour book to raise awareness about eating disorders and encourage sufferers, and used also to be a triathlete etc; you really are an inspiring figure. Could you perhaps share a little about how you came to be the person you are? Also, this is rather clichéd, but what drives you in life?

W: At the risk of sounding clichéd as well, God and my faith are my strongest motivating factors in my life. Having gone through difficult and challenging experiences such as depression and anorexia, as well as having seen the poor and needy living in dire conditions, my faith in God and humanity has deepened significantly. I believe that I've been given these experiences and gifts for a reason, and hope to give back to my community. I am grateful to my friends, family and church who have given me much encouragement and support along the way.

I'm not sure if I'm inspiring, but I do believe in living life with genuity, love and compassion. Because of the love and many blessings that I feel I have received from the poor, my community and God, I feel spurred to bless others in return too.

A: Another congratulations on obtaining your MBBS! It has probably been quite a journey for you. Where do you see yourself going from here, medicine/career-wise, as well as with respect to your humanitarian efforts?

W: I am truly grateful for the opportunity and privilege to serve patients and am really excited about beginning housemanship! This year, I see myself learning the ropes of being a good doctor and one of my personal aims is to be a good listener, and a doctor with both competence and compassion, in spite of the crazy work hours and heavy workload! Career-wise, I hope to use this opportunity to explore surgical specialties as well as my interest in public health to see how I may equip myself best to help the poor.

I intend to commit my leave to more humanitarian trips (albeit short-term ones) as well as to continue with my efforts in reaching out to youth to promote healthy self-esteem and raise awareness of eating disorders and depression through my second picture book.

A: If you could say one thing to all your juniors in YLLSoM, what would it be?

W: Love others and love yourself - deeply and truly. That is the greatest lesson I learnt in medical school.

In medicine, it is easy to get caught up with the routine of studying hard, clerking as many patients as possible and getting oneself tangled in the rat race of residency applications. Academically, I was always an average student who struggled, partially because of my illness in my early years of medical school. So believe me when I say I understand the challenges an average medical student faces.

The biggest lesson I learnt, however, is loving others and ourselves - deeply and fervently.

When I saw beyond the books and looked into the eyes of my patients to value them as human beings, remembering their names instead of bed numbers, and started to love them genuinely, I found myself naturally studying more efficiently; when I started to talk to patients to find out more about their backgrounds and hobbies, I naturally remembered their conditions better as well; when I continued to visit patients and meet up with them even during the MBBS preparations because they needed help, I felt they blessed so much with their support, faith in me and encouragement. Medical school taught me, that loving our patients genuinely (instead of over-clerking them because of our insecurities) reaps rewards which may be momentarily intangible but which surely enrich and bless us later on.

Loving ourselves deeply is also vital. As highly motivated individuals, I find many of us beat ourselves up too hard. Going through and overcoming depression and anorexia helped me realize the importance of self-care. You can only be a good physician if you give yourself time to make mistakes and grow as an individual. I spent a great deal of time journaling the lessons I learnt through medical school because that helped me to reflect and grow as a person. (<http://kitesong.blogspot.com/search/label/Vocation>)

Having adequate rest and knowing when to seek help are key to helping us grow as healthy individuals. It may take a lot of courage and strength, but the decision to do so will be life-changing. Also, I find attending inspirational talks, reading inspirational doctoring books, attending church and meeting up with inspiring doctors on a regular basis essential in nourishing my spirit and keeping my passion to heal alive.

So keep the big picture in mind. Love others and love yourselves as conscientiously as you study. Passing the MBBS, then comes naturally. Really.