

ItChangedMyLife

Doctor, author, volunteer worker... all rolled into one

Tam Wai Jia has battled depression, written four books, gone on overseas missions, and is raring to do even more



Wong Kim Hoh

Senior Writer

Tam Wai Jia says she felt like an oddball when she attended the Forbes' Under 30 Summit Asia held at The South Beach hotel last Thursday.

"Everyone was a CEO or founder or businessman. They were asking me what my product/company/output was. I told them I have no product and no company. I'm also bad at making money and better at giving it away," she adds with a laugh.

But a gatecrashing underachiever she is not. Instead she has crammed a lot of life into her 29 years.

Not only is she a promising young doctor, but also she has written four books, gone on at least 20 humanitarian trips around the world, as well as given time, effort and money to a myriad of causes.

She has also battled depression, survived anorexia and, oh, walked down the aisle with a guy she first met on the Internet.

Nursing a chai latte in a cafe at the National University of Singapore where she conducts classes on global health, she says with a grin that she was moulded by the Singapore system.

"I was expected to study hard, get good grades, have high goals and go even higher in life," she says.

The younger of two daughters of a fund manager father and a remiser mother dutifully fulfilled all those expectations, at least for the first half of her life.

At Tao Nan Primary, Dunman High Secondary and Victoria Junior College, she was a model student, aceing all her subjects and taking up leadership roles in various activities.

A turning point came when she led a team of 20 students on a Youth Expedition Project (YEP) to Cambodia in 2004. For about two weeks, they stayed and helped out in a children's home.

The poverty she saw made her realise how comfortable her life was.

The following year, her junior college selected her to attend a global young leaders' conference in New York. "I met student leaders from all over the world - Ghana, Nigeria and Latin America. These young people were my age but they were championing poverty and human rights and learning how to write policies. I felt that I didn't know anything."

On the recommendation of the Methodist Missions Society, she decided to head for a children's home in Nepal while waiting to get into university after finishing her A levels.

Persuading her father took some effort because of clashes at that time between Maoist rebels and Nepali forces in the country. She turned up in Kathmandu alone and stayed at Sophia's Home which housed about 30 children, aged between three and 12 years.

During her six weeks in the country, she also helped out at a shelter for victims of sex trafficking.

A sobering episode took place three weeks into her trip. The denizens of the children's home had to move.

"The kids were dismantling beds

and packing. I asked the houseparents why. They said they had to move almost every year because as soon as landlords found out they were a children's home, they would jack up the rent.

"They said the problem could be solved only if they had a permanent home. I cried because it was so heartbreaking," says Ms Tam who then hit upon the idea of writing and painting a children's book to raise funds for the home.

Landmark Books liked the concept of Kitesong - a book about the importance of chasing dreams - but publisher Goh Eck Kheng was not too impressed with the initial paintings she showed him.

"I had no art training but he told me to learn water colour painting. So I went to the library, borrowed lots of books and just practised. I would paint from the moment I woke until I went to bed," she says.

Mr Goh tells The Sunday Times: "Within a very short time, she came back with a completely new set of pictures which were very good. It's amazing that she taught herself just by reading books."

He adds: "I just had to help her. She was only 18 and wanted so much to help others. When I was 18, those thoughts were far from my mind."

Kitesong raised about \$125,000 for Sophia's Home and was released shortly after she became a medical student at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Her years in medical school, however, were tough ones.

"I didn't do very well. I was no longer a big fish in a small pond. The other students were brilliant," says Ms Tam, who started feeling pressure piling on her.

It was not her first encounter with stress and depression.

Trouble at home had led her to see a counsellor when she was in junior college. Her parents were then working through issues in their marriage, and her father's career was not going smoothly.

Her decision to move out from home and live in a university hostel made the situation worse.

"I developed anorexia. It was quite innocuous at first. I lost my appetite. To make me feel better, I started going for runs," she says.

Before she knew it, she became obsessed with exercising and eating very little.

"They were the only aspects of my life I could control. I didn't know what was happening with my family, home or my grades."

"I looked jaundiced. My hair fell out. I had amenorrhoea," she says, using the medical term to describe the absence of menstrual periods.

Her parents were extremely concerned but did not know what to do. Ms Tam finally sought help after being told to do so by Ms Anita Fam, her publisher's wife.

"She said I was not well and that I needed help. I was in total denial. But she said, 'If you are not afraid and there's really nothing wrong with you, why don't you just go for that first appointment?'"

Recovery took more than a year with help from professionals at Life-centre, which treats patients with eating disorders, at the Singapore General Hospital.

"I had to see four therapists every week: a psychiatrist, a dietitian, a family therapist and a counsellor. The family therapist suggested that I should ask my parents along because a lot of anorexia issues are rooted in the family. To my surprise, they agreed to come along," she says, adding that her folks have worked out their issues and are doing well now.

Despite her problems, she continued to go on humanitarian trips to places including Sichuan in China, Uttar Pradesh in India and Myanmar during her term breaks.

After her recovery, Ms Tam decided to paint and write a second book, A Taste Of Rainbow, to chronicle



Now a doctor, the four books Ms Tam Wai Jia, 29, has written were used to raise funds for various causes. After finishing her bond next year, she hopes to study for a Master's in Public Health and return to helping the poor and needy. PHOTO: ALICIA CHAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Ms Tam and her husband Cliff were in Uganda on a mission trip for a year. They returned to Singapore last June. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAM WAI JIA

her struggles with anorexia.

The decision met with stiff resistance from many people who told her that the book might jeopardise her career.

"They said that if people knew I was not well, they would see me differently and stigmatise me... But I felt that if there was a stigma to be removed and if no one was doing it, then I would," she says.

A Taste Of Rainbow was released in 2011, around the same time she was given the Young Outstanding Singaporean Award.

"The award was given based on my work with Kitesong. The interview panel asked what I had done since then and I told them I recovered from anorexia and had just written a book about it."

"I was thinking to myself: 'There goes your award.' But when I received the award, I knew it was validation and affirmation that I had to follow what my heart believes in."

Shortly after graduating with a medical degree in 2011, she went with Iris Ministries - a missionary NGO - on a three-week trip to Mozambique.

The trip moved her immeasurably because she came into contact with many people who had given up well-paying jobs to serve the poor.

"Day by day, they'd be driving lorries, picking up beans and feeding children and working with people who are in need but who are not necessarily grateful because of their tribal history and culture of hostility," she says.

"It shook me and made me ask myself: 'What do I stand for? Am I going out of my comfort zone?' Am I willing to give more?"

With a laugh, she lets on that finding a partner was not part of her plan then.

"I had resolved to be single. Who would be like me and do all these crazy things?"

Well, she found just such a person, on the Internet.

Having picked up triathlon to combat anorexia, she chanced upon the blog of Cliff Tam, a Canadian liver cancer survivor who went on to become a triathlete. Now 36, Mr Tam had a liver transplant at 10 and completed the gruelling Iron Man competition - which involves a 3.86km swim, a 180.25km bicycle ride and a 42.2km run - when he was 27.

"I left a note which said, 'Your life is very encouraging' on his blog," she says.

That, in turn, led to him discovering her blog. He started to write to her every day telling her how he was inspired by her work and her worldview.

"He told me he wanted to marry me. I thought he was some cyber-sex stalker," she says with a laugh. "So I told him to stop, and he stopped. And I thought to myself: What a gentleman."

They started corresponding and Mr Tam, a former IT guy turned church worker, swung by Singapore not long after on his way back from a mission trip to Cambodia.

They tied the knot in October 2012, on the day she launched her third book, I Love You.

The couple donated the \$50,000 collected from wedding hongbao to fund the start of a social enterprise in the Indian city of Kolkata, and a guest house in Cambodia, both of which employ rescued sex workers and equip them with livelihood skills.

In 2014, she applied for a year's leave and the couple left for Uganda on a mission trip.

"I was doing medical healthcare

and working on socio-economic projects; he did IT training and Bible teaching," she says.

They returned to Singapore last June. Last year, she wrote her fourth book, Saviour, which challenges conventional ideals of success.

Ms Tam, who will start a training and research stint with the Geriatric Education and Research Institute in July, gives a lot of time to local causes too. For several years now, she has been volunteering at Healthserve, an NGO which provides medical, legal and emotional help to migrant workers in Singapore.

She often gives talks in schools and organisations, including churches, inspiring young Singaporeans to follow their dreams and lead purpose-driven lives.

She and her husband have signed up to become foster parents for children in crisis under a scheme by the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

When she finishes her bond next year, she hopes to study for a Master's in Public Health and return to helping the poor and needy in developing countries.

She smiles when asked if what she does makes her happy.

"While I'm not happy every single day, there is joy in what I do and I thank God for that. It is painful at times, and there is suffering but ultimately, it is what gives us purpose."

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DIFFICULT DAYS

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MS TAM WAI JIA, on her first encounter with stress and depression.



VIDEO: Tam Wai Jia on how she got into volunteer work <http://str.sg/40vc>