



Tan Wai Jia with some children in Mozambique

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAN WAI JIA

# MISSION-BOUND

You don't need to be extraordinary to do something out of the ordinary, humanitarian and development aid volunteer Tan Wai Jia tells *Singapore*. BY FAIROZA MANSOR

**T**an Wai Jia — currently serving her residency at one of Singapore's largest multi-disciplinary hospitals, Tan Tock Seng Hospital — is on her feet 80 hours a week at work. But this year alone, she has found the time to write her third book and go on two volunteer aid trips. To date, she has been on 13 such trips, most recently to Myanmar in July for a five-day programme that saw her teaching children at an orphanage. It sounds like a lifetime's work, but Wai Jia is only 24.

It's little wonder then that the Orchid Jayceettes of Singapore — a non-profit organisation that recognises and awards Singapore individuals committed to humanitarian efforts — honoured her as a

Young Outstanding Singaporean (YOS) in January this year.

Despite the impressive accolades under her belt, or scrubs in her case, the National University of Singapore graduate maintains that she is "an ordinary person", and asks to be referred to by her first name instead of 'Dr Tan'.

At a café in the hospital after coming off a 12-hour shift, the sprightly young doctor says talking to *Singapore* is like coming full circle. "My first humanitarian trip was to Cambodia in 2004 as part of the Youth Expedition Programme organised by the Singapore International Foundation [publishers of *Singapore*]," she says. Wai Jia was 17 then and in her first year at junior college.

The trip marked a turning point for

her. "I had been brought up in a sheltered, middle-class family. Until [my trip to Cambodia], I had never been to a village, visited the poor, or realised how much we have to be grateful for," she recalls. "The trip made me realise how much we can learn from the poor, and about our social responsibility to help the less fortunate."

This desire to contribute to developing communities was further ignited by her own spiritual awakening.

"I decided to reach out to the poor around the same time I accepted Christianity," explains Wai Jia. "I saw how blessed I was, and wanted to do something meaningful with my life."

So while her friends were off on their holidays after their A-Level exams,

Wai Jia set off alone on her first volunteer trip to Nepal in December 2005. The six-week trip, during which she visited an orphanage called Sophia's Home in the country's capital of Kathmandu, was a life-changing experience.

The biggest heartache, she says, was finding out that the children had to move every couple of months because the orphanage could not afford the rents. "The children shared with me their dreams — the kind I had when I was a kid, only I had the privilege to pursue them," Wai Jia says.

Driven to give the orphanage a fixed premises, she wrote her first book, *Kitesong*, about a child's journey as she chases after a runaway kite. It's a story about having faith and following your dreams, says Wai Jia, who also illustrated it. Within six months of its release in August 2006, she had raised \$110,000 from its sales — enough to purchase a four-storey building for Sophia's Home.

"All I did was come up with the idea for the book. That is why my greatest testimony is that you don't have to be

someone remarkable to do something remarkable," she says.

### A HIGHER CALLING

In May this year, Wai Jia went on a three-week trip to help underprivileged children in Mozambique. In preparing for her trip, which took place shortly after her 24th birthday, she asked her friends and family not to give her birthday presents, but to instead bring donations and items for the orphanage she was visiting in the port city of Pemba. She raised \$2,000 in donations and collected a seven-seater carload of children's clothes, shoes, stationery and sports items. These proved useful, but at the orphanage, Wai Jia was faced with a challenge she hadn't expected: extreme hunger.

"[The children] squatted on the floor and shoved fistfuls of food into their mouths, and even snatched food from others. I had never been so heartbroken in my life."

Having witnessed their plight, Wai Jia is now determined to set up a fund for a feeding programme for children.

Now four months into her residency, Wai Jia is not able to take very long breaks, but plans to go to developing countries to do humanitarian work at every opportunity. Her next trip is in October to Surabaya, Indonesia where, with a disaster relief team from her church, she will provide medical care to children and destitute women.

High on her list of priorities is a visit to Kolkata, India, where Missionaries of Charity — founded by the late Mother Teresa — operates. "One of her maxims, to do small things with great love, has inspired me to live life with humility and gratitude," Wai Jia reflects.

### INSPIRED LIVING

Being recognised for her efforts is something that Wai Jia neither expects nor yearns for.

"I don't want to put myself on a pedestal. I've met many people who are far more amazing, yet unknown. I only hope my YOS award encourages

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others," she says, citing the example of Dr Tan Lai Yong, a Singaporean medical humanitarian aid worker who is one of her heroes.

Her parents, both of whom work in the financial industry, have become increasingly supportive, says Wai Jia. "On one hand, they always knew it was good work and would be touched by the photos and stories I brought back, but all these trips kept them on the edge of their seats! At first, they would try to dissuade me from making these trips out of concern for my safety, but in time they became more supportive," she says. In fact, they sponsored her 'graduation trip' to Mozambique.

Wai Jia is grateful for the support, as besides helping her provide aid to those who need it, it helps her grow. "The poor inspire me — their diligence, reverence for humanity and respect for one another. Every time I go on volunteer trips, I meet brilliant people who have given their lives to serve the poor. If they can do it, I can do it too."

Wai Jia also seeks to inspire others through her writing. Her second book *A Taste of Rainbow* — released earlier this year — was prompted by her own battle with depression and anorexia. It is distributed for free as part of a public education drive to promote healthy self-esteem. The book is also helping to raise funds for her feeding programme, as some people who have read it make contributions to her aid work.

Her third book, *I Love You*, is a story about learning to say those three special words. "We don't do it enough. That's the source of many of our problems," she explains. A release date has yet to be announced. "One thing at a time," Wai Jia says with a smile.



Top: Promoting her second book *A Taste of Rainbow*, and with Mozambican children (below)