

## SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY

*"To develop deep roots you need to have locals who speak the language, who understand the culture, who live in that space."*

Professor Wong Poh Kam,  
Director of the NUS  
Entrepreneurship Centre

## EXPERIMENTAL TRAVEL

*"The moment you want to be somebody, you are no longer free."*

Jiddu Krishnamurti,  
Writer, speaker and  
philosopher

## ORGANISATIONS

*"What is going to be the future? How we will organise ourselves? For Singapore, that is the most challenging point for the nation and for the coming generation."*

Fumio Otani,  
President of JCCI, Singapore

## COMPANIES

*"We want to keep our presence open in each country for as long as possible. That shows commitment."*

Yukiyasu Nishio,  
GM of BTMU,  
Singapore Branch

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# 50 RED DOTS AROUND THE WORLD

Singapore's 50th birthday

SG  
50

IN FOCUS : SINGAPORE

Be Movement

VOL. 6

# TAM WAI JIA

## UGANDA & SINGAPORE

*Dr Tam Wai Jia chose a different journey from the path laid out before her. Newly married, she made the decision with her husband to move to Uganda for a year, in spite of their reservations and her husband's chronic health conditions. In a world where narratives of poverty and strife run amok, her words are welcome drops of rain for the parched souls among us. She speaks of hope, purpose and meaning – elevated by her faith, but rooted to this earth to serve humanity. Optimistic and curious, it will not be Wai Jia's accolades that form her legacy. It will be her courage.*



**HAVING TRAVELLED ON MORE THAN 16 SHORT-TERM HUMANITARIAN TRIPS AROUND THE WORLD,** I had a yearning to do something more. Yet leaving Singapore was harder than I thought. With an apparently “noble” cause of serving the poor in Africa, many might think it would have been easy. But I am no Mother Teresa – I enjoy Singapore’s predictability, comfort and security. Climbing the ladder of success to be respected in the eyes of others held great allure for me at the time. My husband and I had just married and set up a home. I struggled deeply with letting go of what I had so strongly tied my identity to.

**MARRYING MY HUSBAND, WHO HAD SURVIVED LIVER CANCER AS A CHILD, CHANGED MY WORLDVIEW.** When he encountered another medical crisis after we met, it was a turning point in my life. Having had a glimpse of the brevity of our lives, we decided we would pursue our dream of serving the poor in an underprivileged community – not tomorrow or in future but today. We wanted to live our dreams while we could.

**WE WERE OPEN TO SERVING THE POOR ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.** Africa, however, with its deep poverty and rich beauty and culture, captured our hearts.

Nonetheless, there were real challenges. With my husband having had a liver transplant, it was medically unsafe for him to take the Yellow Fever vaccine, which is a mandatory requirement for entry into several parts of Africa. Malaria was also a real risk to his health, as it can wreak havoc in the liver. As a medical doctor and his wife, I was torn.

Yet we realised that no matter where we served, there would be geographical, political and health risks. We felt we could not choose our destination based on our convenience. We felt that in some way, it was Uganda that chose us – so we decided to go where we felt God was calling us to. When we followed our hearts we knew that together, we could overcome the challenges ahead.

**MOVING TO UGANDA HAS GOT TO BE THE CRAZIEST DECISION OF OUR LIVES.** I went through a period of grief, as I grappled with letting go of what I had so strongly tied my identity to – my career and achievements. The fear of an uncertain future and the unknown gripped my heart. At one point, I felt utterly lost.

However, my husband and I strongly believe that serving the poor is God’s call for our lives. Nothing worth doing ever comes without risk. So we took the leap of faith. We’ve never regretted our decision. When you follow your heart to do what you know God has created you to do, there is a deep sense of purpose, fulfilment and joy. It’s a magical feeling – nothing quite describes it.

**I’VE LEARNT NEVER TO LET ANYONE DEFINE YOUR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS OR JOY.** When I graduated as a medical doctor, I bought into the belief that with more, I would be happier. With a higher specialist degree, a better paycheck and more things, I thought I would find contentment. But I did not.

When I answered God's call for my life to serve the needy in Africa, I realised that true joy and fulfilment comes not from riches or achievements, but from answering the song of your heart. It might seem too much to sacrifice initially, but nothing compares to the joy of finding your purpose in life and discovering what you were created for. Nothing even comes close to it.

**MY DESIRE IS NOT TO SEE HOW MUCH IMPACT I'VE MADE DIRECTLY IN AFRICA OR SINGAPORE** but to see the community I've impacted, impact the world. As a single person, I know that whatever I do is just a drop in the ocean. What motivates me, however, is when I see the incredible ripple effect of anything we do.

When I hear the village widows from our weekly craft ministry in Uganda share with me how they've used their newly-learnt skills of beading and saving to pay school fees for their children for the first time, I realise that they have become the change-makers of their community. When I see how the healthcare partnership I've established between Uganda and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Singapore has blossomed into an ongoing distance-learning programme to train healthcare professionals in East Africa, I see the power that empowered teams have to make a difference to the international community. When I see young people being inspired by our journey to embark on their own selfless adventures to impact the needy, I marvel at the potential they have to impact this world.

**SINGAPORE AND UGANDA COULD NOT BE MORE DIFFERENT.** While Singapore is a tight, bustling red dot on the world map, Uganda is a sprawling country 200 times the size of Singapore, running at a completely different pace of life. There are many nuances of each culture that are vastly different, and yet deeply beautiful. One learns to appreciate the differences with time. Neither is better or worse – they are simply different.

**MY HUSBAND, CLIFF, IS A GREAT SOURCE OF INSPIRATION TO ME.** He lives without limits. Since surviving liver cancer at 10 years of age, he went on to do an Iron Man event at the age of 27, which is a 4-km swim, 180-km bike ride and a 42.4-km run after. Despite having to take lifelong immune suppressants for his medical condition, he does not take it as an excuse to hold back from serving the needy.

Because he feels God has given him a second chance at life, he lives to the fullest, living purposefully to serve, help and influence others. I continually draw from that. He inspires me to reach my fullest potential, and to live life with deep gratitude, humility and joy.

**HAHA...! I HAD A CULTURE SHOCK ON EVERY LEVEL IN MY FIRST FEW MONTHS IN UGANDA.**

When I started to experience irritability, I realised I was experiencing what is known as "cross-cultural stress." Any stranger on the street would greet me and say hello gregariously as if we were family, schedules would run hours late without raising an eyebrow, and work was far more efficiently done over a cup of tea and a samosa, than done via email. Instead of viewing these events negatively, I learnt to change my own lenses through which I saw the Ugandan culture and people – they were not "wrong", but different. I'm sure, at some point, I must have seemed strange to them too! As I learnt to respect their intensely relational and communal culture, I was humbled by their selfless love for their community. It changed my heart to be more patient, kinder and more gracious. The Ugandan people have changed a part of me forever.

**ONE OF THE GREATEST PERSONAL LESSONS I'VE LEARNT FROM MY FATHER IS: STICK TO WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN,** in spite of naysayers. Some may scorn or mock our chewing gum ban, our "fine" city, our strict laws, but I'm proud that when Singapore makes a decision, we stick by it because we believe in its values and what we stand for.

When you've lived in developing countries all over the world, experiencing water and power cuts, unsafe roads, bomb blasts, street riots and corruption, it's hard not to feel proud of Singapore. I'm proud of the hard decisions Singapore made, and by how far we have come.

**SG50 IS A SIGNIFICANT YEAR FOR MY HUSBAND AND I.** After living in Africa for a year, we both finally adjusted to Uganda and were content to continue serving the poor there. Nonetheless, though it was the harder choice, we both decided to return to Singapore for me to serve out another year of my bond as a medical doctor, and to launch my next picture book entitled "Savour". It's my fourth book and it challenges our generation and the next to redefine our ideals of success, and to step out of our comfort zones to make a difference to others. Upon my return to Singapore, I was pleasantly overwhelmed with the number of SG50 events designed to meaningfully engage young people to rethink how they want to shape Singapore's future. I feel that God has called me back to Singapore this SG50 for the specific purpose of sharing, teaching and imparting my experiences serving in needy communities abroad, to inspire young people to dare to make a difference.

**MORE THAN ACHIEVING ITS GOALS, MY HOPE IS TO SEE SINGAPORE DEVELOP INTO A SOCIETY KNOWN GLOBALLY FOR ITS PEOPLE AS BEING RESILIENT, UNSELFISH, COMPASSIONATE, FILLED WITH INTEGRITY** and ever-willing to lend a hand to communities across the globe. I want us to be role models not just for what we do or accomplish, but for who we are.

**WHEN MINISTER MENTOR LEE KUAN YEW PASSED AWAY WHILE I WAS IN UGANDA, A PART OF ME WAS FILLED WITH DEEP GRIEF, WHICH BLOSSOMED INTO DEEP GRATITUDE FOR EVERYTHING SINGAPORE IS.** I learnt to stop complaining the way I used to, before I moved away, about the little inconveniences of modern

life, but instead give thanks for all he had made Singapore to be. I could not believe that halfway around the world away from home, Africans were coming up to me to convey their condolences. They would tell me, "Back in history, Singapore and Uganda were in the same difficult situation. Because of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore has advanced to become a great country, but we are still struggling today. You have a great leader. Thank you for serving in Uganda." It brought tears to my eyes.

As much as I enjoyed serving overseas among the poor, I had a profound revelation that I would not have had that opportunity and privilege, if it were not for the foundation, education, and security Singapore had given me. My heart is forever changed and humbled with gratitude to Singapore.

**IF I COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT SINGAPORE,** it would be for Singaporeans to slow down and take joy in the little, simple things in life. When I was trapped in the rat race working 90 hours a week, I realised that while I worked more, I had less to give. I looked around me and I saw people working harder to earn more money to maintain a more expensive lifestyle. But they were not happy. In Africa, with much less, I found myself learning to take joy in simple things – a sunset, a smile, having running water for the day. Materially I had much less but I felt much richer.

**UGANDANS ARE A JOYFUL, CONTENT PEOPLE, WHO ARE DEEPLY RELATIONAL.** Because of their communal culture, they unselfishly share everything they have. Perhaps because of the instability, poverty and vulnerability of life in Uganda, they constantly give thanks for everything, and cherish relationships deeply (you just never know who might pass away suddenly from malaria or an accident). Ugandans hardly complain – they are full of gratitude and joy, in whatever situation they are in, with however little or much they have.

**FEW MIGHT GUESS THAT I STRUGGLED DEEPLY WITH DEPRESSION AND ANOREXIA DURING MY GROWING YEARS.** At one point, I lost hope. I doubted if I could complete medical school, much less engage in bringing hope and joy to others through humanitarian work. I grappled with despair and low self-esteem. It was only through the encouragement of friends, family and church that I recovered.

Looking back, I would tell that younger 'me' that your value isn't measured by what you can do or what people think of you, but by who God made you to be. Anyone, with whatever scars from whatever background, can bounce back stronger and make a difference.

**I LIKE THAT I TAKE RISKS AND I AM NO LONGER BOUND BY WHAT I THINK SOCIETY EXPECTS OF ME.** Previously, I used to be preoccupied with the approval of others. But my journey in humanitarian work has changed me deeply – I now feel free to draw my own definitions of success and fulfilment, to take less-trodden paths. I like that, in spite of the odds and societal expectations, I've learnt to go against the grain and take the leap of faith, to fulfil what I believe to be God's calling on my life. •

**If courage was a  
Singaporean person,  
who would it be?  
To celebrate SG50,  
Be Movement uncovers  
50 red dots whose  
courage and action goes  
beyond our shores...**

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