

XTRA | I HAVE A DREAM

MY S'PORE STORY, A TILE AT A TIME

How a photo of MM Lee helps the disabled integrate into society

LOIS NG

SIX years ago, I gave up my dream of globe-trotting the world to help the poor and came home to care for my ailing father. It turned out to be a life-changing move because I became a social entrepreneur.

I was a non-salaried worker in Australia with an international Christian organisation, Youth With A Mission, for three years and spent 10 weeks in Africa where I saw mass poverty in a continent blessed with resources.

My 69-year-old father became bedridden after a fellow resident at a nursing home pushed him down. To add zing to his cloistered life, I took him shopping. But people stared at us for it was rare to see a disabled in a wheelchair in the city. My time in Singapore should benefit more than just my father and siblings.

I then received a God-inspired dream of building a business where people with different disabilities can work together to create gifts, and compete on quality and creativity in the marketplace. It will be a business built on courage, compassion and creativity to empower them to pursue their dreams.

But I had no money, no business experience, no art talent and no experience working with the disabled. I dug in and turned to my father for a listening ear. I was pleased to be able to engage his mind, heart and spirit.

The challenges and pressures of managing a business alone made me appreciate what my father had gone through for more than 20 years. Every morning, he would rise at 4am to sell poultry at Waterloo Street and returned home only after 2pm. He recorded his daily earnings using a black abacus before taking an afternoon nap. At night, he set off to the market again to stock up on the fowls to sell the next day.

I finally understood why he turned to drinking when he could not face the pressures of supporting a family of 12.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, I went to the nursing home, roused my father from his afternoon nap, sat him on a chair, and holding his hand, I told him in



OF MEMORIES PAST The writer, as a toddler sitting on her mom's lap.

PHOTO COURTESY LOIS NG



PHOTOS IN SOUVENIRS FROM MICA COLLECTION, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF S'PORE

MM TILE SOUVENIRS

Tile souvenirs featuring pictures of the Minister Mentor – taken at the Aug 9, 1965, TV press conference where he announced Singapore's separation from Malaysia – are available from \$19.90 and sold at the Esplanade gift shop, Chinatown Heritage Museum, Visitor Centre on Orchard Road, Jewel Box at Mt Faber and Sentosa Island shop. For corporate orders, email sales@you.com.sg.

English: "Papa, I love you."

I kissed him on his cheek. He awoke from drowsiness but was silent. Minutes later, I saw his face crumple and a tear roll down his cheek.

TILE STORY

As unattractive as a plain white tile may seem, it has the potential to look different and become useful once creative and practical ideas are applied on it.

This is also the story of a motley group of 15 disabled people aged 15 to 60, who work with me. They include people who are mentally and physically disabled, as well as the autistic and the hearing-impaired.

My business mission is to transform the disabled who are lowly-educated, unskilled and cannot fit into society to become part of a skilled workforce, which can contribute to our economy. This

requires time, a custom-designed training programme and a holistic approach.

It led a government scholar to plainly state that what I am doing is *fei wu xun huan*, Mandarin for the recycling of waste.

I was shocked and angry, but the element of truth in his words sank in. Our society does not make a distinction between charity and empowerment. All help given to the disabled is charity and the way to help is to give to charitable organisations.

But there are Singapore women who have built successful businesses in the waste management industry – for example, Olivia Lum of Hyflux, which purifies waste water and rebottles them as drinkable Newater, and Loh Wai Kiew, the former chief executive officer of SembCorp Environmental Management.

Confronted by a negative and

rigid mindset, I began to connect with the struggles our founding fathers faced after Singapore was forced to separate from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965.

They had the unenviable task of rescuing a nation from poverty and gloom because all we had were people who were uneducated and lowly skilled. They could have walked away; instead, they displayed courage, tenacity and sacrificial spirit in transforming it from a Third World to a First World nation.

I know all about temptation because I had wanted many times to walk away from the pains of chasing my dream.

RECEIVING THE FATHERS' BLESSINGS

Our Tile Story souvenirs finally caught the eye of Duty Free Shop buyers who wanted to sell them at Changi Airport Terminals

2 and 3. My aim is to showcase quality, creative and inspiring Icons of Singapore souvenirs designed and made in Singapore by a special workforce.

To achieve this, I needed the help of someone who would have an intimate understanding of the struggles and challenges I face, and have the charisma and influence to bring about a change of mindset to our society in record time.

This person is our nation's key founding father Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

In a two-page letter and sample souvenirs hand-delivered to the Istana on July 3, I told Mr Lee that my company Studio You has caught the spirit of our founding fathers by responding to a need of our time. It is a private citizen's effort to create change, and to solve the problem of marginalisation and unemployment of the disabled.

The Singapore Story, I added, deserves celebration and promotion in a creative way. Tile is a suitable medium to depict the Singapore story because it is a common material used in the homes and offices.

Tile souvenirs of Mr Lee are produced by us to thank him for all that he has done for this nation. His consent, I wrote, will empower the disabled to pursue their Singapore Dream.

Mr Lee acted out of the fullness of a father's heart in allowing us to use his pictures under no conditions. I later discovered he has never before allowed his pictures to be used for commercial purposes.

He could have donated money but he agreed to support a creative idea to break mindsets about the way we help the disadvantaged. I believe this is just the beginning of integrating the marginalised into our workforce and a new industry could be borne out of this.

Last September, my father died while I was in Israel on a pilgrimage. I wailed that I had nothing left because I came home for him. I can easily replicate this business model abroad, especially in countries that have lower operating costs. But I now have a new hope. The support I have received from a key founding father of Singapore has given me the confidence to continue to pursue my dream in this little island of possibilities.