

The City of Peace
marathon in Dili,
East Timor

Setting Off a Chain Reaction

BY MARIA CRISTINA G. BALUYUT

The sun beat down mercilessly on Zhang Tingjun as she ran the "City of Peace" marathon in Dili, East Timor, last June. As the 28-year-old approached the finish line, she fought a lump rising in her throat. When she was done, she caught sight of her three running mates and saw that they too were overwhelmed with emotion. It was not because their ordeal was over. For Ting and her friends, each step they took would help save a life.

It all started in July 2009 when the four young Singaporean women – Ting, Jasmine Wong, Anina Boshoff and Alexandra Toh – decided to go on an adventure together. Someone suggested the five-day Tour De Timor bicycle race and they jumped at it.

Soon they were talking about the poverty that has gripped East Timor. "The conversation slowly shifted to a common vision – to use adventure as a catalyst for change," Ting, a former TV journalist and former professional netball player, recalls. The quartet set up The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP), with the goal of using their love for sport and adventure to help the underprivileged.

In addition to their four-hour-a-day training schedule, they appealed to friends, family and colleagues for donations. Their initial efforts raised just S\$100 (\$78). Then out of the blue, Ting's netball mentor, Ivy Singh Lim, donated S\$20,000 (\$15,550). "To have someone who really believed in us and what we were trying to do meant more than the cheque in my hand,"

says Ting. In all they raised more than S\$45,000 (\$35,000), including S\$10,000 from Standard Chartered Private Bank.

The four friends arrived in Dili in August 2009, several days ahead of the start of the race. Needing a place to stay, they took up an offer to camp at HIAM Health, a rehabilitation centre for malnourished children.

During their week at the centre, the women learned that more than half of Timorese children under five suffer from malnutrition. They also discovered that the centre was struggling to get enough money to prove what it could do to help. TCRP came to a decision: the money they had raised would go to HIAM Health.

One child at the centre in particular touched Ting's heart. Two-year-old Sarah came from a poor family. "Sometimes the cases of malnutrition are so severe that the damage to the child is irreversible. But in Sarah's case, she received help early enough and had gone from being very listless and wasted, to this smart, happy and active toddler," Ting recalls.

Unfortunately, Sarah contracted tuberculosis, and the centre lacked the funds to monitor her condition regularly. "She symbolises to me all that I'm fighting for," Ting says.

When the TCRP founders returned for the 2010 Dili marathon, they were joined by 18 other runners. The group raised an additional S\$10,000 for



Playpoint
Singapore
donated a
playground

HIAM Health, as well as a S\$28,000 (\$21,750) playground donated by Playpoint Singapore. Today HIAM Health provides an inpatient facility for malnourished kids, teaches families preventive measures and offers training for health workers and volunteers.

The centre's director, Rosaria Martins da Cruz, says TCRP's contributions have been instrumental in saving the lives of dozens of children, "So far we have been able to receive families from ten of the 13 districts that make up Timor-Leste."

TCRP next plans to scale Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa, in February 2011. Their goal: to raise at least S\$30,000 for Amani Kids, a Tanzanian home for street children and AIDS orphans.

"We know a \$100,000 donation isn't going to save the world," Ting says. "At the end of the day, the combined impact of a group of people trying to do good will be far greater than the four of us can achieve on our own."



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