



People usually do sports to achieve a certain standard of fitness or to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Sports can also be a way to let off some steam and have a thrilling bonding session with your peers. What if I told you that these physical activities could be put to good use such as alleviating poverty and malnutrition in developing countries?

Zhang Tingjun, Co-founder and director of The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP) as well as her team have started this amazing movement since 2009.

SportSanity managed to get an exclusive with Tingjun at their cozy office. We managed to find out about her sporty background, which later led to the beginning of TCRP.

I heard you used to be a national netballer representing Singapore.

When did your netball journey begin?

I started playing netball in primary 5, and you know at first you just start in school, club and eventually playing for the country if you just play long enough right?

How has being involved in netball over the years, made an impact in your life?

I think for me sports have been a very big part of my life. I guess a lot of my character is developed on the court. A lot of life lessons like discipline, team bonding, how to lead and also how to have the humility to take the bench when you're not on court. You know it's very easy to be main players but I think the biggest lesson I learnt were on the bench, not when I was captain, or when I was playing.

It was learning sacrifice, training 6 days a week, there are lots of things to give up and that sense of perseverance and commitment to something, whether its towards your teammates to your belief in Singapore or the Singapore team.

What were you doing before TCRP?

Before TCRP I was with Channel News Asia (CNA), I was a journalist. Before that I worked in a bank for two years. With TCRP it was different where I felt like my skills as a journalist, skills doing events and marketing and what I've learnt from netball and my years of training as an athlete in the team, all of that came together in TCRP, because so much of what we do brings all that skill sets together.

How did the idea of TCRP come up?



In 2009, myself, Alex and two other girls, we heard about a mountain bike race at Timor Leste and we just thought it'll be fun to take part, it sounded like an adventure and that really marked the beginning of TCRP.

In the beginning there was 4 of us, we came together and we didn't think of setting up a non-profit organization, we were all in our jobs or schooling so it was only in 2010 that I left CNA and Alex graduated. It was just the both of us and then in 2011, we registered as a non-profit organization, managed to get a little funding from a donor and that's how TCRP started. So now we have a team of four, but we have also over the years built up very strong relationships with our partners all the way from the legal side to the branding side and they are what makes it possible for us to stay lean and have such a small team, because they've been so kind in offering their support to us.

Why was Timor Leste on TCRP's heart?

As we learnt about Timor, it had a very turbulent history, a lot of people suffered, a lot of civil unrest and we just thought maybe we could use sport, adventure as a platform to raise the profile of Timor Leste as a country that was ready for tourist and also to raise funds for a cause on a ground that resonated with the team. So that's why Timor is always close to our heart, it's five years on and we still go back and it's where TCRP first started.

In Timor the first year we did, Tour De Timor, 450km mountain bike race, and when we came back to Singapore a lot of people, friends and families asked us for our future plans. We wanted to share our experiences of Timor with them but we knew Tour De Timor was a little tough for an average person to handle the crazy biking race. So we thought, what else could we use?

What is the main challenge you have faced since you started TCRP?



In terms of the events themselves, "how difficult should we make them?"

If it is a hike then how difficult should we make it? The thing is the more difficult it is, the more fun it is for us but fewer people can take part so we got to take it back a bit to be more mainstream like marathons but then we don't want to be too mainstream as then it defeats the purpose. Everyone can go and run a marathon, we want to keep it interesting, more exciting and to keep us having fun as well because charity can be fun right?

It's also balancing how challenging you make your sporting events, handling your volunteers, thinking about things like sustainability and thinking about growing your team.

What was your most memorable event in TCRP?

The first event, Tour De Timor, because it was really the life changing moment for me when we were in Timor, things like malnutrition and kids, I guess you see so much on TV and newspapers you become quite desensitized. It was really just a person, Rosaria Martin D'Cruz, who was the director of Hiam Health, one of the charity partners we worked with for Timor. That first year we raised funds for them, we had no idea what we were doing and she came to us with tears rolling down her eyes "thank you, I want my country to be like yours, my people to be your people, healthy in their bodies, smiling in their faces" and these are things that I look for granted up till that point. I may not be a Rozaria, in the trenches, I may not be able to be that person but I think we can do a lot for those people who have given up everything to lead these fights be it against human trafficking or malnutrition, I think if there's a way for us to support them even if we're not the ones on the ground fighting for them, we should! So that to me was one big moment.

Why use sports as a catalyst?

Again the marathon in 2010, it's to bring people together, they might not understand malnutrition which was our cause on the ground but they all understand running a marathon. It provided a platform for people to connect and to begin to from there understand Timor, to start from something, which connects everybody through sports.

What are some of your goals for TCRP?



We hope to continuously foster the current relationship with our existing charity partners, to deepen that relationship and see what else can we do for them. Sports is a great platform but we want to make sure that we come in with a little bit more to support them over a long term, help them be sustainable. And also how we can better equip our catalyst to be more effectively in spreading the word as we learn more on how to have an impact as well.

It's a journey, we have no clear plans, it will change and part of it is sports have proven to be a great platform but maybe art is another? We don't keep ourselves bound by how we started but in terms of how we grow. To continue to explore and push ourselves while not losing sight that we are passionate about sports and adventure and it's a tool that does connect us all.

How sports can change the world?



Sports is a tool that can engage thousands of people and bring them together for a common cause. So I think a lot of that has translated into what we do at TCRP, it is the same thing where we use sports as a platform to bring people together but to achieve more. It is more than just winning the game; it's not about the game but what that does for people.

Written by Charity Chan

Charity is a writer contributing her works for SportSanitySG. She is currently studying in Ngee Ann Polytechnic - Mass Communications. You will be amazed by her enthusiasm towards anything fitness. Her passion includes, working out at the gym, rock climbing, travelling and enjoying good food with great company.