

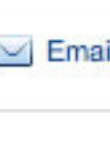


# SINGAPORE 9

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### Ex-national netball star starts social change revolution



By Jeanette Tan | Singapore 9 – Mon, Jul 30, 2012

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From netball to TV reporting, Zhang Tingjun has literally gone places in her life thus far. (Photo courtesy of ...

When Zhang Tingjun was in Primary 1, she was so against school that she jumped out of a school bus by climbing through a side window.

She escaped with superficial skin scrapes, but her mother was not at all pleased.

"I got into so much trouble," she confessed to *Yahoo! Singapore* during a recent hour-long interview at a homely apartment space in Clemenceau Avenue North — home to the offices of The Chain Reaction Project since four months ago. "But I really didn't want to go to school — and desperate times called for desperate measures," she chuckled.

Up until Primary 5, Zhang's temper tantrums about school (and the injustices of life in general) would continue — she would have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to school in her pyjamas, ending up having to change into her uniform right at the front gate.

At one point in Primary 4, she even threw all of her schoolbooks down the rubbish chute, and her mother made her retrieve them after she had calmed down.

Meeting the lithe, bubbly and attractive Zhang in person — a finalist in the Yahoo! Singapore 9 campaign — makes it incredibly difficult for one to believe she was the same angry girl growing up.

Now aged 29, the social entrepreneur admits the fact that she was an angst-filled, moody middle child who had few friends in school played a key role in shaping her adult character.

"I think a lot of that — the sense of needing to fight for the underdog, or that sense of justice, really came from when I was a kid," she said. "When you're the one who has no friends, when you grow up you tend to look out for those people as well; those you feel are being bullied, or who you feel don't have someone watching their back."

#### The netball years

After Zhang was transferred to Methodist Girls' School for her final two years of primary school, she made many more friends and learned to channel her anger into competitive sport — specifically netball, which she would spend the next 16 years of her life playing at school, national, regional and world level.

She started playing for Singapore at 15, as early as one might imagine possible, and moved swiftly from under-aged squads to the national teams. By the time she was in junior college, Zhang was training six days a week for four different teams — her school team, her netball club, the national team and the semi-professional *Netball Super League*.

She took a four-year hiatus for her bachelor degree, majoring in psychology at Pepperdine University, but even then she played with fellow expatriates in a club team, adding on water polo and lacrosse on a recreational basis.

After returning to Singapore, though, she played on for another four years while holding full-time jobs, first at Standard Chartered Bank and then at Channel NewsAsia as a news producer and reporter.

Even after a full decade of playing for Singapore, she says she misses playing it as often as she used to.

"I miss the adrenaline rush — I miss the packed stadiums, the camaraderie with my team, and that sense of pride in playing for Singapore," she says. "There's a certain sense of pride for us — when we take the court, we do what we can, (but) you're still singing the national anthem, wearing national colours and feeling the sense of pride for being in the team."

#### Coming full-circle with The Chain Reaction Project



Zhang Tingjun (second from right) is one of the co-founders of The Chain Reaction Project. She poses for this picture ...

It was only in starting The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP), a non-profit organisation that helps the underprivileged, that Zhang felt her myriad life experiences would come full-circle.

"That (starting TCRP) was when I really felt everything come together, where all these different skill sets that I had picked up along the way became useful," she shared.

And this proved true enough for Zhang — from working as a team, the rigour of discipline and training during her netball days, learning how to write sponsorship proposals and organising events at Standard Chartered, to learning how to leverage media for causes at Channel NewsAsia. For a point in her university life where Zhang aspired to become a helicopter paramedic — simply so she could combine adventure with helping people — TCRP was able to weave in a sporting-adventure element to her work.

"I think it was really a journey — all of that culminated in TCRP and what we've got today, I guess," she said with a smile.

So what is TCRP? Zhang says it started in 2009 with four girls — herself and co-founders Alexandra Toh, Anina Boshoff (who is based in South Africa) and Jasmine Wong — taking part in Timor-Leste's world-renowned Tour de Timor, a 450-kilometre bicycle race across challenging terrain, weaving between the country's districts.

There, they witnessed the hardship faced in the fledgling nation, and resolved to raise money for a charity they would adopt — this ended up being HIAM Health, a women's and children's malnutrition centre. Thanks to donors who believed in their cause, the girls raised some \$44,500 for the centre.



The Chain Reaction Project in one of its first adventure trips to Timor-Leste. Here, the team and several volunteers ...

The girls returned to Timor in mid-2010 for the Dili City of Peace Marathon, raising an additional \$37,500 for HIAM Health. This time, they were accompanied by 19 new friends, known as "catalysts", who supported the cause, and delivered a Playpoint playground to the centre worth \$28,000.

TCRP grew over the next two years that followed, scaling Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Mount Apo in the Philippines, and adopting Amani Children's Home as well as Visayan Forum Foundation respectively. From both, they raised about \$140,000 altogether for the two organisations, which tackle education and human trafficking.

The project as a whole now boasts more than 1,000 catalysts. Zhang is now looking to Siem Reap, Cambodia's Sala Bai school for their next adventure and fundraising effort.

Her tiny team of three full-time TCRP staff now collaborate with companies and schools, matching them to charities abroad for philanthropic or volunteer work, depending on their needs.

"Our strength is in being a bridge, because for us it's about inspiring people to volunteer, or to donate, and then matching them with organisations — and for us, I see that continuing here," she said.

Why fly all over Asia instead of starting from home, one might ask? Zhang says she and her team are "more than happy" to help local charities, starting with Singaporean youth.

TCRP is currently looking at ways to incorporate the needs of the local charity and social entrepreneurship scene into the community involvement programme curriculum in schools here.

"We've been talking to local charities and to NVPC (the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Council) to see how we can best fit in the local landscape," she said. "I think it's really important, and for us it's definitely something we would love to get involved in."

#### Keeping it up, and getting by



Tingjun posing with children from Amani Children's Home in Tanzania. (Photo courtesy of The Chain Reaction Pro ...

One does not simply work for free, even if for a good cause — and it is always a challenge to give up a promising career for social enterprise.

At TCRP, the three staff allocate themselves small allowances, but all of them have freelance or part-time jobs at the side to sustain them — for Tingjun, it is emceeing, while Toh is a spinning instructor who also does photography on the side, for example.

Tingjun said TCRP may grow in the coming years to eventually be able to sustain itself, but of utmost importance is belief in their cause and the fact that what they are doing does matter.

"Honestly, there's nothing else I'd rather be doing," she said. "I consider myself fortunate to have found my calling so much earlier in life than other people who have had these long fulfilling careers and say, 'okay, now it's time to start giving back.'"

Having said that, Zhang says she was "very surprised" to be chosen as one of the final Yahoo! Singapore 9, given what some of the other nominees have themselves achieved in the social entrepreneurship field.

"I don't actually think we deserve to be in the top 9 — there are others doing some really amazing things, so in a way, us being in the top 9 represents everything, collectively, that the social enterprise scene in Singapore are doing," she said.

Zhang says she firmly believes that everyone in social entrepreneurship works hand-in-hand for their objectives, adding that TCRP has benefited from working with other nominees' organisations such as Project Happy Feet and DJ Emily Teng's Blessings in a Bag.

"All of us (social entrepreneurs) are really part of the fabric of our society, and I don't think anyone can function without the others. With TCRP, we're just part of that chain reaction," she said.

"We're not leading it — we're just part of it."

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As part of this year's National Day celebrations, we are honouring 9 outstanding Singaporeans under the age of 35 who've made their mark in the area of Business, Social Enterprise or Entertainment. Role models and visionaries, they are the future leaders of Singapore.

See the best photos from our wrap-up party as we announce the winners in each category.

See the slideshow

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## THE JUDGES



Singapore 9 Judges

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