

Gearing up for change

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Not content with traveling for the sake of it, these four intrepid adventurers decided to channel their love for adventure travel into a more meaningful cause. Co-founder Alexandra Toh shares with us the inspiration behind The Chain Reaction Project.

How did The Chain Reaction Project come about?

In 2009, my teammates (Jasmine, Anina and Tingjun) and I came together with a shared passion for adventure and philanthropy and started The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP). At that time, I was still pursuing my Bachelor's Degree in International Business and working as a freelance Spinning Instructor.

It was after one of my spin classes when Jasmine approached me and told me she was putting together an all-women's team to take part in a five-day 450km bike race in East Timor – the inaugural Tour de Timor. She asked if I was interested and if I knew anyone else who would be keen to take part. Not knowing much about the country and being complete amateurs at mountain biking and racing ... it seemed like the perfect adventure to embark on.

Within an hour, we had formed a team of four. When we finally met up to discuss how we would prepare for the race, we learned more about East Timor and its turbulent history. We then saw an opportunity to give back through our adventure, and used the race as a platform to raise funds and awareness for HIAM Health, a malnutrition rehabilitation centre. Little did we know that this race

was going to change our lives forever.

Why cycling?

It was by chance that the first opportunity presented itself in the form of a cycling race for peace in East Timor. The Tour de Timor was the first big race any of us had done at that point. Since then, we've taken part in other races that aren't specific to cycling. We've climbed Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Mt. Apo in the Philippines, as well as taken part in marathons in East Timor and Cambodia.

The inspiration behind the name, The Chain Reaction Project is of course, a bicycle chain and how we are setting things in motion. It also revolves around the idea of setting off a 'chain reaction' where we inspired more people to do good; make a difference and be a Catalyst for Change.

What sort of contributions has TCRP done?

We focus mainly on causes that deal with women and children's issues. We have done work with organisations that tackle malnutrition (HIAM Health, East Timor); human trafficking (Visayan Forum Foundation Inc, Philippines, and Sala Bai Hotel School, Cambodia); and poverty alleviation (Amani Children's Home, Tanzania and Gawad Kalinga, Philippines). Since 2009, we have raised almost S\$500,000 for the five adopted charities we support and impacted an estimated 35,886 lives across four countries.

You've said that you believe TCRP is a "catalyst for change" and that your team wants to spur others into action. How do you achieve that?

By using a soft introduction to giving back. TCRP is about doing things differently and changing the face of philanthropy. We want to show people that doing good can be fun and is not limited to Flag Day or charity in the traditional sense. Through these trips, we want Catalysts to realize that giving back is not just a one-off thing but it is a journey. So how they do it has to make sense to them. It should be through a platform that they're passionate about because chances are they'll continue doing it. For us, it was through adventure and travel.

How often are these overseas trips?

We now run two to three Catalyst trips each year to various countries and the "adventure" aspect varies from running marathons to climbing mountains. Each trip varies from a short three-day trip over the weekend to a seven-day expedition of sorts. Each Catalyst that joins us is required to raise a minimum of S\$1,000 for the particular cause. 90 percent of the total funds raised goes directly to the charity on the ground, while 10 percent goes toward the operational costs of TCRP.

What sort of training do you have to go through before each adventure?

Depending on the adventure, we usually run a series of training sessions leading up to the trip that entail group runs at MacRitchie Reservoir, hikes at Bukit Timah Hill and cycling sessions at West Coast Park. We work with our training partners to provide participants with a training schedule they can follow outside of these sessions. We also get experts to give talks to the group on how to prepare and pack for these trips.

What were some of the challenges that your team faced?

The initial challenge of working together as a team was quite daunting. The team came together and met for the first time one month before the actual Tour de Timor. We were all unfamiliar with each other's different styles, both at work and in the field.

To enter a five-day, 450km bike race in a foreign land for the first time, with people you barely knew was a challenge in itself as the dynamics of a team determines the outcome of the race. Fortunately, though sheer patience and determination and mutual understanding, we managed to successfully complete the tour without killing each other and even continued on to grow TCRP together.

One of the most important lessons we took away from Tour de Timor is that it is in the differences of each person wherein strengths lie. Somehow, we managed reconcile our differences and use it to our advantage through bringing the different skill-sets we had to the table to make this initiative work. We believe in team work making the dream work.

What keeps you going when faced with setbacks?

Setbacks are a part of life and we never expected this to be an easy road when we started. So we try to treat them as lessons or opportunities to do things better or differently. Remembering why we first started and what we set out to achieve helps keep us going and on track as well. In this field, it is very easy to get lost in the details, especially when you and your team handle everything from admin to finance to marketing and running of the trip. It can get very overwhelming so we make sure we remember why we started in the first place, and remind ourselves to look at the bigger picture.

What is the most fulfilling part about what you're doing?

Witnessing the impact our efforts have made not just to the beneficiary but to the Catalysts as well. While TCRP is about making a difference to our adopted charities, it is also about inspiring individuals to do what they love, for good. Seeing that transformation and change in perspective with each Catalyst pre- and post-trip and seeing them continue the Chain Reaction in their own way is what we hope to achieve and see more of.

What are some ways people can support this cause?

Individuals can join us on our adventures, or if they see a match and want to support one of our adopted charities, they can get in touch with us through our website (www.tcrp.com) or email us at info@tcrp.com.