



## Working for a Cause

### Social Entrepreneurs Use Adventure to Do Good

Social entrepreneurs Zhang Tingjun and Alexandra Toh.

By Tan Chee Teik

**Two sportive young women are obsessed with helping the less fortunate in Timor Leste and Tanzania. News of the fund-raising adventures of The Chain Reaction Project help to enlist more volunteers to share their vision of doing good for society.**

**THE** Tour de Timor is a challenging five-day mountain bicycle race stretching 450 kilometres across 13 districts of Timor Leste. While preparing for the arduous adventure, Zhang Tingjun, Alexandra Toh, Anina Boshoff, and Jasmine Wong found that they shared a common vision to raise awareness and funds to help the people of the new nation.

Using the race as a platform, and harnessing the power of social networking and media, the four women founded The Chain Reaction Project, TCRP, and successfully





Group at HIAM-Health with Timor Leste President, Dr Jose Ramos-Horta (standing fourth from left).

raised more than US\$35,000 for HIAM-Health, a Dili-based malnutrition rehabilitation centre for children.

Today, Tingjun, 29, and Alexandra, 26, are full-time directors of TCRP. Tingjun was a journalist and producer with Channel News Asia, and a former Singapore national netball player. As a freelance emcee and motivational speaker, she devotes her time to developing TCRP's growth strategy and sharing the team's vision with the community. She is passionate about being a catalyst for change and enjoys coming up with creative approaches to philanthropy.

Alexandra is a spinning instructor and has been an inspiration of fitness to many. Taiwanese by birth, Singaporean by nationality and Filipino at heart, she has a passion for cycling and photography. She has a Bachelor in Science degree from the Singapore Institute of Management and State University of New York at Buffalo. The way the degree programme was structured gave her time to juggle studies and her work with TCRP. The professors were very supportive and subjects such as strategic business, and marketing collaterals helped her in the running of the organisation.

There were many challenges for

raising funds to keep the Project going. Tingjun says: "We had to learn how to raise funds from scratch. There was a steep learning curve. One challenge was the clarity of direction for the organisation. We want to do good and are passionate about giving back to society. We pace ourselves in TCRP's growth. As I've never run an organisation before, I learnt by attending relevant talks and read widely."

Initially, it was difficult to get funding but they were fortunate to meet generous donors. There was a businessperson who was looking for bicycle parts online and stumbled on the TCRP Web site. He was excited about what the Project was doing and met them a few times. He became an ardent supporter of their cause and is among the big regular donors to this not-for-profit organisation. Besides donations, supporters help to organise fund-raising projects and they provide creative corporate social responsibility consultancy as well.

One of TCRP's pet projects is to help HIAM-Health. This non-governmental organisation works to alleviate the problems created by long-term hunger and malnutrition. The organisation is the initiative of its director Rosaria Martins

da Cruz and has been operating out of Dili National Hospital since 2003.

The vision of HIAM-Health is to empower Timorese people to work together to reduce high infant and maternal mortality rates and to assist in the reduction of poverty and hunger through education and support.

The main focus of HIAM-Health's work since the beginning has been the monitoring and supplementary feeding of infants and children suffering from malnutrition. This service included health and nutrition education for their parents and caregivers, focusing on teaching preventative strategies to combat malnutrition.

As the programmes have expanded over the years, so has the knowledge and understanding of the root of the problems in Timor Leste. It became evident that outreach programmes were not making enough headway. Ministry of Health statistics confirmed that malnutrition in children under five increased from 42.6 per cent in 2004 to over 50 per cent in 2008.

HIAM decided to raise funds to construct a centre that will give parents and caregivers the opportunity to learn through a participatory process. A practical learning approach has been found to work best when dealing with low levels of





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Preparing for an arduous ride at Presidential Palace in Dili  
(from left) Jasmine Wong, Alexandra Toh, Anina Boshoff, and Zhang Tingjun.

literacy and education.

It was decided to construct a facility which would enable people to live in and adopt changes in a safe environment. The methodology is to implement change in the social and cultural beliefs regarding health, nutrition, and childcare practices that are proving to be detrimental to the well-being of the people of Timor Leste. The centre was opened in November 2009.

Tingjun says: "When people are asked to donate to charities, they become jaded over time. To have a more sexy plat-

form, we weave the charity initiatives into cycling in Timor Leste. Others join in the adventure and they bring along their friends to build a new community."

She recounted the time when she was pushed out of her comfort zone during the cycling contest: "I was physically spent when I made contact with this little boy carrying two sacks of coffee beans. In a moment, I realised that our adventure was his reality."

Both Tingjun and Alexandra work tirelessly to encourage others to join them in "doing what you love—for

good". Tingjun says: "Every single day, we immediately get to work, almost 24 hours. A social entrepreneur is one whose company is designed and set up to give back to the community in one way or another. The effort is greater than that put in by a business entrepreneur. There is one extra tier: social entrepreneurs have to ask how to measure the social impact on society."

Alexandra adds: "We want to see the organisation grow. We push and push and push. We generate a lot of ideas for fund-raising."

Tingjun's philosophy of life can be



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Group at Dili International Airport, 2010.



summarised in this thought: "If one day I realise I've died and have been reincarnated as a charged particle. I hope I don't just float around doing nothing. I hope I'm one of those particles that really live it up and bounce around with other charged particles. That's how the Northern Lights are formed. But in the meantime, I'll just live life loud here on Earth. We can bounce out things of beauty, inspiration, and wonder too. They're just harder to spot".

When she was in primary school, she had very few friends. This affected her and so she wants to stand up for the underdog. Tingjun says: "My journey with TCRP has been life-changing for me. It made me realise the power individuals have to be catalysts for change. To be sustainable, you have to be doing something you already love. My role model is the director of HIAM-Health Rosaria Martins da Cruz. She has been unwavering in dedication and wants to change the future of her country through social work. There is no short cut to success."

While growing up in the Philippines, Alexandra saw the vast gap between the rich and poor. While with the international school, she had the chance to visit orphanages. Such visits planted the seed in her to give back to the less fortunate. She says: "Everyone has a responsibility and ability to give back to society. We have the ability to make a difference in another person's life."

### Return to Dili

In June 2010, TCRP returned to Timor Leste to participate in the inaugural Dili City of Peace Marathon, running 42 kilometres up mountains, through villages, and along the pristine coasts of the country once ravaged by civil war.

This time a group of 22 Catalysts for Change joined the adventure and to continue their support of HIAM-Health rehabilitation centre for children. Together they delivered a US\$22,000-Playpoint playground and more than US\$7,500 for the children.

As a show of support for TCRP and HIAM-Health's combined efforts, Timor Leste president, Dr Jose Ramos Horta, officiated at the unveiling of the playground at the centre.

With awareness growing about HIAM-Health's life-changing work and dedication, the organisation was awarded a certificate of recognition in the area of human rights on 9 Dec 2010.



Tingjun and Alexandra among the magazines.

### African Adventure

In 2011, a team of 11 TCRP Catalysts went to Moshi, a small town at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

They took part in the annual Kilimanjaro Adventure Challenge to raise funds and awareness for the Amani Children's Home. The catalysts competed in all or part of the three-stage race—summitting Mount Kilimanjaro which is 5,895 metres high, a two-day bicycle race of a distance of 98 kilometres, and a full marathon.

Amani Children's Home is dedicated to the protection of Tanzania's most vulnerable population: street children and AIDS orphans. It is estimated that there are 2.5 million orphaned children in Tanzania.

Since its founding by Tanzanians in 2001, Amani has rescued hundreds of children from the perils of life on the streets, where they face a high risk of HIV transmission, malnutrition, and abuse.

Amani, which means "peace" in Swahili, provides healthy food, education, counseling, and medical care for every child who turns to them for help. The TCRP initiative has raised over US\$30,000 to fund the purchase of a

larger farm for the home.

The Home spends US\$28,000 a year on food for the orphanage. A larger farm will allow it to be more self-sustainable by enabling them to grow enough maize and other crops to use throughout the year, to raise animals for food and extra income, to teach the children animal husbandry, and to use as a transition home for older Amani youth who can learn to manage a small farm before venturing on their own.

### Vision for the Future

While both Tianjun and Alexandra lament that the number of participants for the Project's adventures are limited, they are pleased that many outside Singapore volunteer to help to raise funds since they can't join the trips. Both women want to have a map of the world dotted with small initiatives scattered across the world and driven by like-minded adventure lovers who are passionate about helping humanity and have a clear idea about their role as a responsible corporate citizen. ✎