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THE VALIANT DREAMER

While most people have dreams that revolve around themselves, Dr Tam Wai Jia's ambition in life is to help others fulfil their aspirations. BY ALYWIN CHEW

PHOTOS DR TAM WAI JIA

Volunteering at a children's home in Cambodia in 2004 gave Dr Tam Wai Jia a glimpse into a starkly different world to the comfortable life she had in Singapore. She was only 17, but the experience sowed the seeds for her humanitarian work that has impacted various communities around the world.

"I didn't know what I had signed up for. After all, I never really saw, understood or experienced what poverty meant," says Dr Tam, 29, who is today a medical officer with MOH Holdings, the holding company of Singapore's public healthcare clusters.

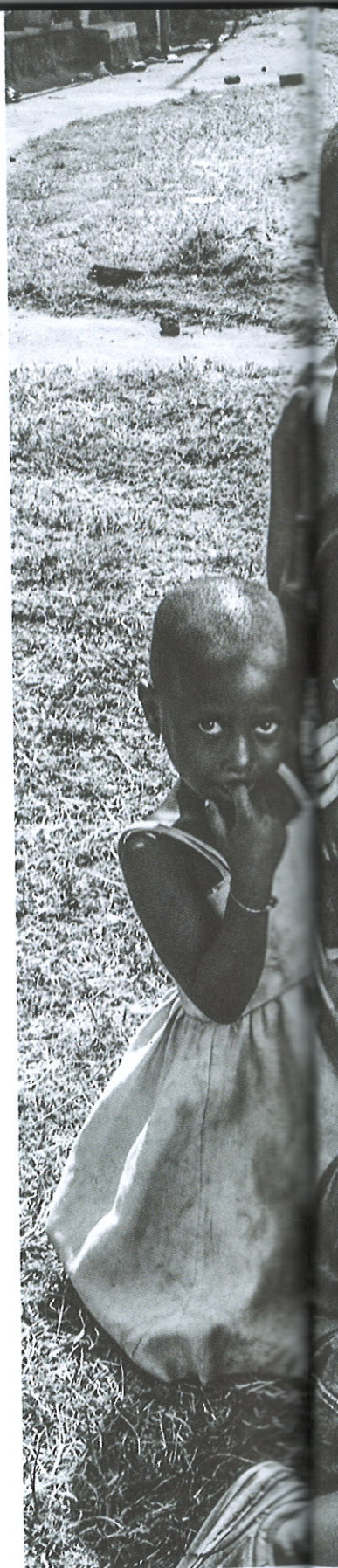
She says that two encounters in Cambodia were particularly poignant. The first involved a boy who used a trash bag to create a kite for her. The gesture left a deep impression as she had always associated kites with dreams. She was also inspired after listening to the boy's ambitions in life despite his circumstances.

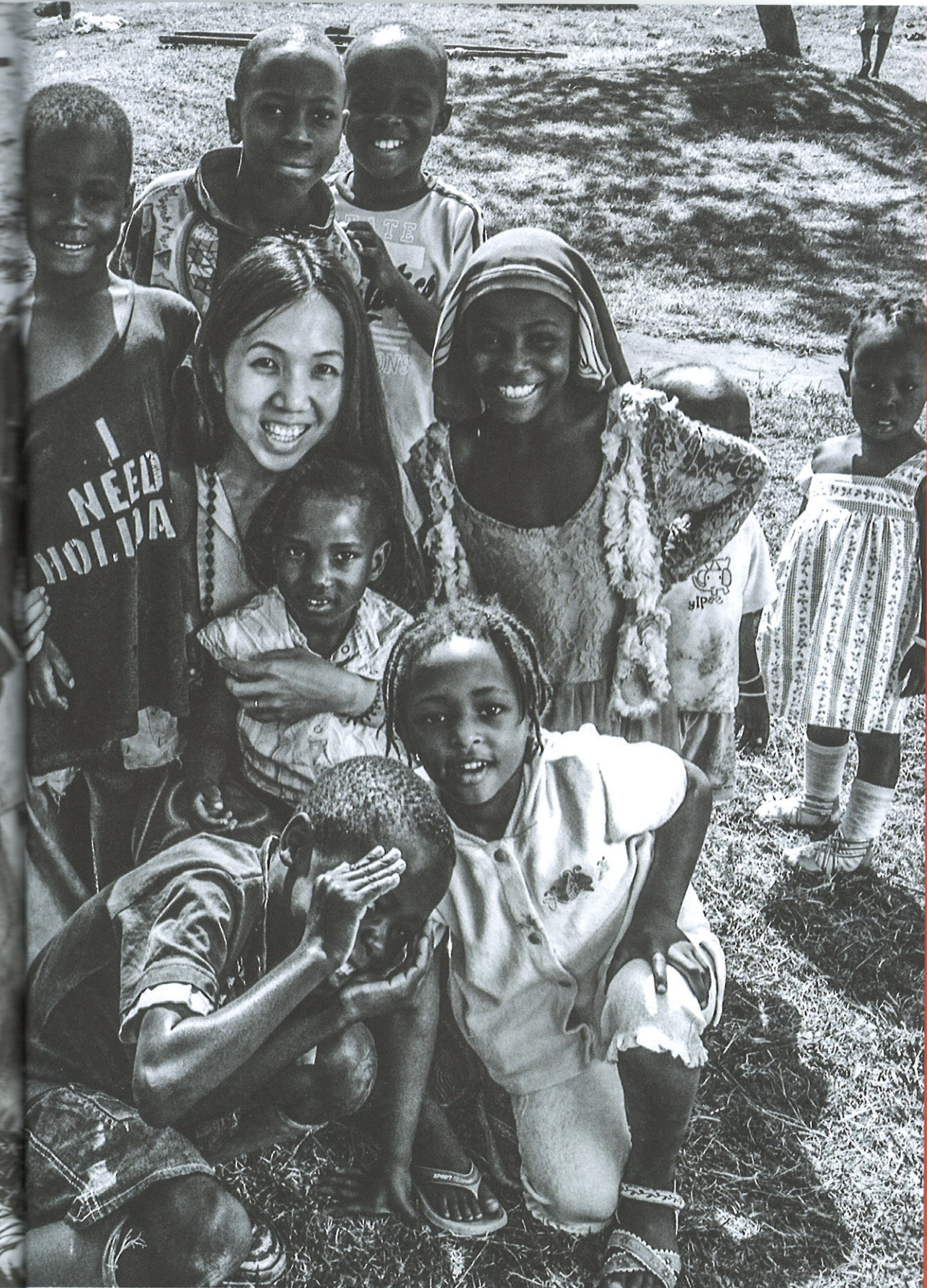
The other encounter was with a girl who, like her, dreamt of becoming a doctor one day. In a letter to Dr Tam months later, the girl said her hopes had been dashed because her mother had fallen ill and she would have to become a farmer to support the family. Dr Tam tried but failed to secure sponsorship for the girl to pursue her studies.

Despite this setback, the incident inspired her to embark on another initiative to help underprivileged children. In 2006, she started a book project to help raise funds for Sophia's Home, an orphanage in Nepal where she had done an internship. The home was forced to move as it could not afford the new rental rates set by the landlord – a problem it encountered almost every year when the lease ran out.

The book, titled *Kitesong* – inspired by her meeting with the Cambodian boy – features

Dr Tam Wai Jia with children in Uganda, where she spent a year working with a non-government health organisation to strengthen the country's healthcare system.





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paintings by Dr Tam, and raised more than S\$100,000 for the orphanage. The orphanage used the funds to secure a permanent address, which gave the children greater stability, as the home could now focus on helping them to fulfil their potential than worry about relocating every now and then.

When Dr Tam tied the knot with Cliff Tam in 2012, the couple used all of their wedding hongbao (red packet) money, which amounted to about S\$50,000, to help start and support social enterprises in Cambodia and Kolkata. These organisations employ women rescued from sex trafficking to give them new livelihood skills.

FOSTERING UNDERSTANDING

In 2014, Dr Tam took a sabbatical and left to undertake humanitarian projects in Uganda with her husband. Between June 2014 and June 2015, she worked at Mildmay Uganda, a non-government health organisation that works closely with the Ministry of Health in Uganda to train and empower local health professionals to care for the elderly and the marginalised.

Her contributions have helped to strengthen that country's healthcare system by creating awareness, promoting advocacy and research about geriatric health issues, and improving the capacity of local health leaders. This led to opportunities for her to speak about geriatric health at a medical school and the Palliative Care Association of Uganda, which supports and promotes the development of and access to palliative care services, as well as highlight gaps in this field to the country's Ministry of Health.

She and her husband also started socio-economic initiatives like a sewing and craft school. Many of the women who took classes at the school now sell their own handicraft for a living.

One of the most memorable incidents, says Dr Tam, was receiving a letter from Sue, who became one of the school's trainers. In the letter, Sue wrote: "Thank you for coming into my life. Thank you for doing something special for me. For the first time in my life, I have paid off school fees for my daughter. For the first time, I have done something for my family."

In another incident, Dr Tam helped save the life of a child. She says: "One evening, a villager friend called to ask for urgent help for his baby, who was turning blue at a village





ABOVE: Dr Tam with the baby she helped save. **FACING PAGE:** The orphanage in Nepal, which Dr Tam helped raised funds for with her book *Kitesong*.

“Everyone can make a difference, whatever one’s age. Today, whenever my husband and I speak at schools, non-governmental organisations or churches, our message to young people is this: Keep that dream of making a difference to the world alive.”

Dr Tam Wai Jia, volunteer worker, doctor and author

hospital. Not knowing much about paediatrics and knowing that the hospital did not have the facilities to support further investigations, I felt cruel telling him that there was nothing I could do. But it later dawned on me that I should hire an ambulance to send the child to the national hospital, located about an hour away. It took a great deal of coordination and running around to do this from where we were based, but when it was finally done, their baby was sent just in time to receive the care she needed. And she survived.”

Dr Tam also established an online distance-teaching programme between Mildmay Uganda and the geriatric department at Singapore’s Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. All these efforts, she says, have led to the fostering of better international understanding between Singapore and Uganda.

She adds: “Because of the on-going distance-teaching programme between the two countries, the teams I have built up in Uganda and Singapore have a better understanding of each other’s distinct cultures. The team in Singapore also has plans to use their lessons learnt in cross-cultural sensitivity, research and education to connect with other Asean nations in the region in future.”

Sabashtain Lepcha, a pastor who worked closely with Dr Tam during her time in Nepal, is full of praise for the Singaporean’s selfless contributions. He says: “When we were helping the orphanage to relocate, I noticed that Wai Jia was very eager to help with the loading and unloading of equipment. I could tell she had not done such things in her life before, but there she was, lending a helping hand with all the heavy lifting. That really left an impression.”

Despite becoming newly minted parents in February this year, and having temporarily relocated to Canada, where her husband is a citizen, the couple have not stopped their charitable efforts. In fact, they have been helping Syrian refugee families in Canada integrate into society. They are also learning about Arabic culture as they mull over a possible humanitarian mission to the Middle East. She also plans to write and paint *Home*, a book that aims to raise awareness about adoption, fostering and refugees.

“I learnt that everyone deserves a chance to dream. Everyone can make a difference, whatever one’s age,” says Dr Tam of what she has learnt from her humanitarian endeavours. “Today, whenever my husband and I speak at schools, non-governmental organisations or churches, our message to young people is this: Keep that dream of making a difference to the world alive.” ☺