

Contents

03 Foreword

04 Background

FACTOR 1 **Banking on Sustainable Business with a Heart**

10 Alteration Initiative

14 Eighteen Chefs

18 Adrenalin Events & Education

FACTOR 2 **Driven to Make a Strong Social Impact**

24 Bettr Barista

28 Dialogue in the Dark

32 Mother and Child

36 The Singapore Shawl

FACTOR 3 **A Committed Team with a Common Purpose**

42 O School

46 Breakthrough Café

50 Project Dignity Kitchen

FOREWORD

This publication by the Ministry of Social and Family Development features the success stories of 10 accomplished social enterprises in Singapore. Through the insightful sharing by their founders on the highs and lows of their respective journeys, we hope you will be motivated to support them, and perhaps even be inspired to start your own social enterprise to benefit the disadvantaged in our community.

The government will continue to promote the development of social enterprises through funding, capability development and public education. Beyond such help provided by the public sector, social enterprises also need the partnership and support of private and people sectors to succeed. Enlightened individuals and corporations who want to give back to society can contribute to the growth of social enterprises with investments in terms of financial support and expertise in areas such as sales, marketing, management and organisation development.

I wish to thank all the 10 social enterprises who are featured in this publication for sharing their stories. Your passion is an inspiration to all and an encouragement to aspiring social entrepreneurs.

Madam Halimah Yacob

Minister of State

Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN SINGAPORE

Social enterprise is essentially a business with a social objective – it harnesses the forces of the marketplace, applying business practices to achieve its social mission in a financially sustainable manner. Unlike ordinary commercial businesses which tend to have a single i.e. financial bottom-line, social enterprises usually have double or even triple bottom-lines (the other bottom-lines being in the need to achieve their social mission, for example, to provide employment to the needy and disadvantaged and to meet environmental targets). Social enterprise may take different legal or ownership forms, such as a Private Limited Company, Company Limited by Guarantee or Co-operative.

Social enterprises add value to society economically as well as socially, and can do that through various ways. A social enterprise can use the revenue generated from its business activities to support its identified social mission, e.g. a shop or a café run by the trading arm of a charity. Another model is a social enterprise that achieves its social mission through its operations, e.g. by providing training and employment for disadvantaged people.

Role of Social Enterprises in Singapore

As Singapore prospers, new and emerging social needs become more complex and multi-faceted. More innovative and creative ways are needed in the social sector to address these social needs. Social enterprises are one such innovative alternative that can address the social needs which are not met by conventional service providers such as mainstream businesses, government agencies, and charitable organisations.

Hence, there is an increasing awareness of and interest in the social enterprise sector in Singapore, particularly amongst voluntary welfare organisations, other non-profit organisations, students, entrepreneurs and

the media. This is also evidenced by the establishment of research centres, courses and conferences by the Institutes of Higher Learning, the growing number of talks and networking sessions on the topic of social enterprise as well as media stories in recent years.

However, the social enterprise sector in Singapore is still in its nascent stage, with about 170 social enterprises. These comprise about 90 social enterprises that are either stand alone or part of a larger parent charity or voluntary welfare organisations, and about 80 co-operatives.

Understanding the concept of social enterprise is still limited to particular segments of the society. Most are still confused over the concepts of social enterprise, charities and businesses with corporate social responsibility. More could be done to educate the public in this regard. More concerted efforts could also be made to train, encourage and recognise social enterprises as well as help them build robust network and form partnerships with the people, public and private sectors.

Social Enterprise Models in Singapore

A 2007 study by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation on social enterprises identified 4 jet social enterprise models in Singapore:

- **Work Integration Model** – The work integration social enterprises provide skills training and employment opportunities to the needy disadvantaged (i.e. those who have higher than usual barriers to employment, such as persons with disability or ex-offenders) as a means to reintegrate them into society and enable them to be self-reliant. They give an opportunity to people who may not find employment on the open market.
- **Plough-Back-Profit Model** – The objective of these social enterprises is to generate profits which would be reinvested to further their social causes, and/or the social programmes of their affiliated or parent charities. This helps VWOs and charities reduce their reliance on donations and enhance their financial sustainability.

- **Subsidised Services Model** – These social enterprises provide subsidised services to needy and/or disadvantaged clients, and charge commercial rates to mainstream customers. This ensures that the people who could not usually afford certain services have access to such services to improve their quality of life.
- **Social Needs Model** – These social enterprises are designed to serve society's social needs or address certain social issues. These issues can include community bonding, family bonding and racial harmony.

The greatest value of social enterprises in Singapore is perhaps in the provision of employment opportunities for the needy disadvantaged Singaporeans to achieve self-reliance and improve their quality of life. Currently about half of the social enterprises in Singapore (excluding co-operatives) operates in the Work Integration mode. The government encourages more of such social enterprises to be set-up so that more needy disadvantaged could be empowered through training and employment.

Challenges Faced by Social Enterprises in Singapore

There are several challenges faced by social enterprises in Singapore. Firstly, Singapore is a small market. This means that there are limits to the extent to which social enterprises can leverage on economies of scale. Hence social enterprises in Singapore tend to be on a smaller scale than similar initiatives in larger countries. Nevertheless, their market share can be expanded if they venture beyond Singapore and are able to adapt their business and service models to meet the needs and conditions in other countries. Secondly, Singapore's open economy results in a very competitive marketplace. Social enterprises therefore need to provide products and services which are comparable to in terms of design and quality as well as marketed just as well as those of conventional businesses.

Key Success Factors of Social Enterprises

There are many social enterprises that have done well despite the tough challenges that they faced. Different social enterprises have done it differently. Some social enterprises are fluent in the language of dollars and cents. Some social enterprises put their mind and soul into creating significant social impact for a better community. Some social enterprises possess an immense level of perseverance and passion, in their pursuit to realise grand dreams and bright ideas. Yet, three key success factors remain unchanged. They are:



FACTOR 1 Banking on Sustainable Business with a Heart

Sustainable social enterprises possess viable business models which fulfil social objectives, such as providing skills upgrading, training and employment opportunities for those beneficiaries in need. Not only do they significantly add value to society, they likewise generate much economic value for their business.



FACTOR 2 Driven to Make a Strong Social Impact

Social enterprises with strong social impact are distinguished by the significant changes that they make to the community. With much empathy towards their beneficiaries, these social enterprises are motivated to fulfil aspirations, nurture potential and positively change the beneficiaries' mindsets and capabilities.



FACTOR 3 A Committed Team with a Common Purpose

Committed social enterprises possess an immense level of perseverance and passion, in their pursuit to realise grand dreams and bright ideas. This could only be possible with the presence of a steadfast and committed team, bound by deep camaraderie.

The accomplishments of ten social enterprises are captured in this publication as they share how they had diligently applied their winning formulas.



BANKING ON SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS WITH A HEART

FACTOR 1 Sustainable social enterprises possess viable business models which fulfil social objectives, such as providing skills upgrading, training and employment opportunities for those beneficiaries in need. Not only do they significantly add value to society, they likewise generate much economic value for their business.

ALTERATION INITIATIVE

Altering Lives

● She donned designer corporate suits. She sold a lucrative business to the world's top marketing services agency. She lived the carefree life of leisure and travel.

But after their six years of carefree living, Jo and her husband KC Ng, decided to give back to society. Inspired by the Bob Dylan classic "The Times They Are A-Changin'", the duo set up a company called A-Changin' in 2010, with a grand mission to marry their business acumen with a noble social cause. This births forth the creation of Alteration Initiative, which employs single mothers and trains them in professional sewing and alteration services.

Indeed, the past two years of running Alteration Initiative has brought Ms Josephine Ng, much closer to the daily lives of some wonderful, but perhaps slightly needy women. "It has been a truly humbling experience," she says. "I have learnt to take nothing for granted."

"As social entrepreneurs, we need to think big. I believe in doing things right. It's not about going for the cheapest rental and paying the lowest wages."

Josephine Ng



Homing in on a niche market

To date, Jo and KC are the proud owners of two store outlets, namely Haute Alteration at Mandarin Gallery and Alternation Initiative in Chevron House.

So, why is there a focus on sewing and alteration? “We saw the need for high quality alteration places,” explains Jo. “We could cater to people with high net worth who wanted peace of mind, and not have their corporate suits massacred . . . we also felt seamstresses don’t get enough credit; theirs is a skill and trade worth preserving.”

As to the initial choice on helping on helping single mothers, Jo and KC felt that this group of women could do with more long-term help and support. Sewing is a life-long skill which allows the women to work flexible hours. It thus gives them time and space to cope with their children.

Jo also works with welfare and voluntary agencies to identify single women to be trained for garment sewing and alteration. Moving on, Alteration Initiative also reaches out to other women in need, such as those in financial distress and the physically disabled.



Striding Forward

Ms Maryah bte Mohd Sharif, 38, was a divorced mother of three. She faced financial difficulties and had to juggle between her needs for employment and work flexibility to provide and care for her family. Thus, Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura (PPIS) referred her to Alteration Initiative (AI), where she joined the team as a trainee junior seamstress on a part-time basis two years ago. Since then, she has made great leaps forward in her career at AI, having been promoted to an assistant and then branch manager. “I enjoy my work,” she says about her daily duties in operations, administration and customer service. AI is proud of her achievements too.



Fair wages, reasonable charges and prime locations

From day one, it has been “one learning experience after another,” says Jo. For example, she met customers who expect to be “charged cheaply” – just because it’s a social enterprise and the workers are presumed to be cheap labour. Jo points out: “This is exactly the mindset that we need to change. We came across seamstresses who had not received any pay increase for 10 years! We pay them market rates here . . . we have one single mother whose salary went up by 50% within a year because she really excelled.” So Jo has to explain and re educate her customers that a social enterprise still needs to pay fair wages and charge reasonably for quality work.

Likewise, Jo expects her seamstresses to deliver top notch quality and display the right attitude. At first, she found it alarming that some women would simply not show up at work without first informing her. Realising that these women have been isolated from the workforce for long, Jo took pains to impress upon them the importance of punctuality and on-time delivery. “I have learnt to empathise and be patient with them,” says Jo, “and over time they know they have to meet customer expectations.”

As Alteration Initiative caters to a well-heeled clientele looking for a perfect fit, its locations have to be suitably upscale. Jo and her husband have to persevere in securing their ideal locations– like Mandarin Gallery in the heart of Orchard Road and Chevron House in the hub of the financial district. The couple encountered malls which equated social enterprise with sub-standard services and even enquired about the people they were hiring. “We had to gain the trust and confidence of landlords. As social entrepreneurs, we need to think big,” says Jo. “I believe in doing things right. It’s not about going for the cheapest rental and paying the lowest wages.”

Ultimately, it is seeing the changes in people’s lives as a result of acquiring a skill that “no one can take away from them” which inject the greatest joy into any social enterprise. ■



EIGHTEEN CHEFS

Benny ST
Executive Chef

Recipe for Doing Good

● "Please don't come to Eighteen Chefs because Benny is a nice guy!"

Owner-chef Benny Se Teo says this out of confidence in his offerings. "Come because you like the food, because the price is right, and because of the service and ambience." Benny runs not one, but three outlets, which offer a staggering array of innovative and mouth watering food choices which allows customers to mix and match dishes and sauces. He even allows customers to "legally vandalise" the cafes, and there is always a cacophony of noise and chatter from a predominantly younger crowd.

Benny's Eighteen Chefs is certainly no ordinary business. There again, Benny is no ordinary chef and entrepreneur. In fact, Benny is a man in a hurry, having wasted many of his prime years behind bars. Between 1983 and 1993, he was in and out of prison four times for a heroin addiction. His first job in the F&B industry was as a cook for the prison superintendant. "It was a prestigious job - it meant I did not have to eat prisoners' food," he says.

Standing strong at 52 years of age, Benny is a forerunner in the social enterprise scene in Singapore. If it was passion that got him started, it must be perseverance that has kept him going. He simply refused to give up despite several failed business ventures which included a courier business in hiring ex-offenders. With sheer determination, Benny set up Eighteen Chefs in 2007, after his stint in London, where he became the first Asian to be trained in Jamie Oliver's restaurant, Fifteen.

"Come because you like the food, because the price is right, and because of the service and ambience."

Benny Se Teo





New lease of life

From the day he opened his first Eastpoint mall outlet, Benny has been committed to giving ex-offenders and delinquents a new lease on life, by equipping them with life-long culinary skills and a career in the food business. With this initial success, Benny was able to attract savvy investors who saw potential in his business model. This led to the set-up of two other outlets in Tiong Bahru Plaza and Fusionopolis, with a fourth outlet due to open this year.

Benny is not resting on his laurels. He is always on the lookout for more suitable locations in Singapore and even franchising offers in Malaysia. Even in the midst of expansion, hiring people on the fringe still remains his topmost priority. His dedication is rooted in a promise Benny made to himself: "After six interviews, I couldn't get a job because of my past. I vowed that if I ever became a boss, I'd hire ex-convicts."

Of a total staff strength of 50, almost 20 of them are reformed delinquents and ex-convicts, who serve as chefs and service crew.

His greatest desire is to see more delinquents and ex-offenders regain their self-esteem and embrace the vast opportunities in life. One ex-offender worked for him as a supervisor for 18 months, before moving on to be the regional general manager of an international F&B chain. Another manages his Tiong Bahru outlet, whom he praises to be "so trustworthy", he "can sleep peacefully at night."



New Identity

Gary Lau, the resident "Punk Rock Chef" at Eighteen Chefs, experienced the turning point of his life when his school sent him to the cafe for an attachment. The reformed delinquent was offered a job, and he has done so well that Benny promoted him to Supervisor, overseeing seven people. The 21-year-old now has a completely different outlook on life. He says: "Benny helped me a lot and taught me to have a good attitude. He even gave me my own name card!" The job title on this Supervisor's name card? Punk Rock Chef, of course.



Work to maximise profits

Benny is clear about what sustains his business. His maxim is that social enterprises still have to "work to maximise profit" while keeping the social mission alive. "Before you can help others, you need to make sure the business is sustainable. You can't afford to delay paying rent. How can you do good when you don't feel good?"

Benny also advises: Provide quality food and services, and have differentiated product offerings. "At the end of the day, customers will come back only if the food is good and not just because they support our social cause," he says. ■





ADRENALIN EVENTS & EDUCATION

Eventful Enterprise

● This is not a run-of-the-mill company. Employees here commit at least an hour each week to learning sign language, a practice that has been in place since the company opened its doors in 2008 to three hearing-impaired employees.

The interior is wheelchair-friendly to accommodate two physically disabled employees. There are also a couple of youths from distressed families who are given a chance to learn a skill and forge an identity.

Having seven disadvantaged and disabled employees among its team of 17 staff adds to the distinctive strength of Adrenalin Events and Education. It stands out as a shining example of how a business with heart thrives with a talent pool that is diverse and out-of-the-ordinary.

Managing Director Mr Richardo Chua says: "There is no distinction between beneficiaries and the rest of the team. Everyone is an asset. This is where we get our competitive edge." Beneficiaries are also matched to roles and positions according to their strengths. Shares Richardo: "We find them the best job fit that grows their talent the most, or enhances their job performances the best."

At Adrenalin's premises in Braddell Tech, employees bustle around for corporate projects, putting together large-scale events such as the President's Challenge, Ascendas 10th Anniversary and Shell 120th Anniversary celebration. For weary employees, a bed is available in the office for anyone who needs to catch 40 winks.



“There is no distinction between beneficiaries and the rest of the team. Everyone is an asset. This is where we get our competitive edge.”

Richardo Chua & Gary Lai

The dynamic duo

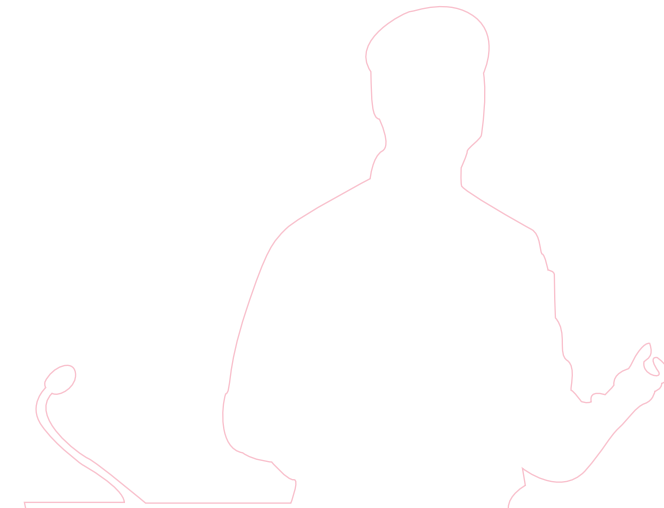
Through the past four years, Adrenalin has made steady progress under the partnership of Richardo, 30, and his cousin and co-founder Gary Lai, 29. Richardo shares that he “oversees the big picture” and “lays out the vision” while Gary “makes things happen” with his meticulous attention to detail.

Elaborating on the partnership, Gary adds: “Richardo sets the goals and targets while I’ll think about what it means in terms of the number of shows we need to do and the number of clients we need to clinch . . . we click as a team.”

The duo has also forged close bonds with all their employees. As events management requires “frequent fire-fighting and creative solutions,” Richardo feels firmly that the company’s culture of unity and open communication has been “critical” for Adrenalin’s growth. The company became profitable more than a year ago.

The interview and selection process is stringent. “We make sure the talents we interview are able to work well with beneficiaries before they make the cut. It is one of the first things we look out for,” explains Richardo.

For the beneficiaries, similar standards of performance, commitment and discipline apply, although he admits that acquiring the necessary skills may take longer for them. However, given time, training and trust, every single one of the employees who have made it past Adrenalin’s doors, whether they are hearing-impaired or physically disabled, have gone on to prove their worth.



The heart to go the distance

While there are clients who pay special attention to Adrenalin because of the social mission, most of them are on the lookout for timely and quality service delivery. “People come to us because we have heart but mainly because they know we are a dedicated, attentive and committed team,” asserts Richardo.

Besides providing training and employment opportunities, Richardo strives to leverage on partnerships with other social enterprises in order to create a multiplier effect. “Ultimately, I want to bring the idea of social enterprise to as many as possible,” he says.

More than a quarter of Adrenalin’s events have directly produced social impact, such as the Shell Charity Gala, which raised \$1.2 million for charity, International Volunteer Day, which saw participants pledge more than 10,000 volunteer hours, and City Square Mall Eco projects, which raised awareness for green initiatives. The drive to do well trickles down to smaller initiatives. In a flea event the company organised, items that were not sold were donated to the Salvation Army Thrift Store.

Although Richardo concedes that running the social enterprise has been “incredibly tough,” he embraces challenges each day with much motivation and excitement. “Many of the beneficiaries are capable. Instead of letting them end up as car washers or furniture movers, I would rather give them a future in events management. This is my passion and my calling.” ■



Giving Up Was Not An Option

Physically disabled by a stroke in 2005, Mr Michael Quek, then a sports men and blue collar worker, was at a loss. But with sheer determination, Michael set himself on the road to recovery, starting with a one-year IT Apprenticeship Program at the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD), before venturing further into the IT line. Fast forward seven years later, despite the setback, Michael has upgraded himself from doing wiring work to being a core events executive at Adrenalin doing multimedia work. “I’m proud and happy because I see my hard work come to life”, he says cheerfully. “If you don’t give up, there’s always hope as long as you are willing to learn.” Indeed, Michael is thankful to Adrenalin for providing people with disabilities such opportunities.



DRIVEN TO MAKE A STRONG SOCIAL IMPACT

FACTOR 2 Social enterprises with strong social impact are distinguished by the significant changes that they made to the community. With much empathy towards their beneficiaries, these social enterprises are motivated to fulfil aspirations, nurture potential and positively change the beneficiaries' mindsets and capabilities.



BETTR BARISTA

Brewing a Nurturing Academy

● This passionate coffee lover travelled around the world in her quest for that perfect cuppa, which then led to soul searching which in turn paved the way to self-discovery.

If coffee could bring immense amount of joy to her, could it not be just the fix to turn other lives around and make the world a better place?

Ms Pamela Chng, 35, ended her successful web consultancy of eight years and went headlong into her new-found mission, facing new uncertainty with strong conviction and courage.

The Bettr Barista Coffee Academy was created in November 2011. It combines the two things closest to Pamela's heart – reaching out to women in need, and nurturing a refined taste for specialty coffee in Singapore.

"It is using the power of business to do social good, to empower women who have less and could do with a skill for life," says Pamela, who was personally barista-trained in the United States and Australia.

"I believe that when you empower women in an all-rounded way, the capacity for change is greater."

Pamela Chng





Muscling in on change inside out

Bettr Barista Coffee Academy works closely with social service and community organisations to identify and reach out to single mothers, women from low-income families or youths-at risk. Each enrolled student pays \$300 to undergo a comprehensive 12-week course, spending four weeks learning everything about coffee brewing, followed by an 8-week industry internship with a specialty cafe. The actual cost of the professional brewing course costs Bettr Barista \$3,500 for each headcount.

Besides the training, the cafes that Bettr Barista partner with may also offer permanent employment opportunities for successful graduates. Skills and life upgrade indeed, for Bettr Barista's beneficiaries.

For trainees, it's not just about churning out the perfect cup of coffee. It's all about holistic training, and perhaps, about handling failures. Pamela shares: "I have been in rooms full of perfectionists with low failure tolerance. How you react to a situation plays a huge role in how it turns out."

So, aside from sessions with a leading barista trainer from Melbourne, trainees spend time with a clinical psychologist from the world renowned Albert Ellis Institute to build emotional and mental resilience. Surprisingly, they are also put through gruelling paces of yoga, outrigger canoeing and self-defence combat. "The women we work with have more intricate needs," says Pamela. "It is not enough to equip them with a skill; we must equip them with emotional, mental and physical resilience, confidence, teamwork and discipline. I believe that when you empower women in an all-rounded way, the capacity for change is greater."



Mapping the road ahead

Of its initial cohort of six applicants, three students made the cut. Two students have since graduated from the programme – the third one had to drop out because of family problems.

Bettr Barista aims for a larger class of at least six students for its second intake.

Without a predecessor to model Bettr Barista after, Pamela admits she manoeuvres her way as an entrepreneur with lessons gleaned from trial and error. She shares: "Nobody gets it right the first time. But if the roadmap is still open, you have the chance to create it and to shape it. And that's powerful."

To keep the social enterprise sustainable, Pamela relies on the academy's commercial arm. Top-grade Arabica beans that are roasted fresh are delivered through a specialty coffee subscription service, while customisable and interactive brew bars are available for hire for corporate events. The academy also distributes coffee-making equipment and conducts appreciation and tasting sessions for the public and the corporate sector.

Whatever the challenges may be, Pamela is motivated to make the world a kinder, gentler and better place for those deprived of opportunities in life. "It is a 24/7 sacrifice, if you can't withstand the rigour of trying to bring change, you're going to fail. But if somebody is changing, something must be working. If it is working, then it is just a matter of taking it and scaling it." ■



Life Changing Stint

"I did nothing as I didn't know what I wanted or could do", says Ms Nur Diyanah bte Sharif about the first 16 years of her life, before starting her Barista training at Bettr Barista in January 2012. During the three-month training stint, she was introduced to the aromatic world of coffee and learnt the art of making a perfect cuppa. She also interned at the local *Smitten Coffee and Tea Bar*, where she learnt discipline, focus and patience – newfound virtues which have empowered her to take on full-time work at Bettr Barista and changed her life. The 17-year-old is looking forward to training future batches of Bettr Barista students and sharing her life experience. "

Seeing New Light in the Dark

● In complete darkness, a stunning reversal of role takes place. As visitors get 'lost' in the seemingly eternal maze of darkness, the reassuring and confident voice of their visually impaired guide is the only help they rely on to lead them through the maze.

Dialogue in the Dark (DiD) is a social enterprise that aims to educate the public on the experience of blindness.

"Three forms of dialogues take place in the dark; with yourself, with friends on the tour, lastly, with your guides," explains Glen Ng, 41. As the General Manager of this facility, Glen hopes that this experience can act as a catalyst to change mindsets. "How often do you talk to blind people when you see them on the street?"

This concept originated from Germany, and was brought to Singapore in 2009 by Ngee Ann Polytechnic through its business enterprise arm Social Lab Limited. Over the past three years, DiD has employed 21 visually impaired guides, equipping them with presentation skills and confidence. Glen firmly believes: "Through social enterprise, we can empower and enable beneficiaries in a way charity cannot."

Working alongside his guides are 10 final-year students doing their internship which includes managing the operations, marketing and outreach efforts of DiD.



"Through social enterprise, we can empower and enable beneficiaries in a way charity cannot."

Glen Ng

DIALOGUE IN THE DARK



“Know their limitations and challenge them”

Glen’s personal philosophy serves as a reminder that self-limitation is perhaps the greatest obstacle of all.

In Germany, Glen saw a DiD franchise that served hot drinks in the dark, and believed it could be replicated in Singapore. “Initially, the guides had their doubts and were reluctant,” he recounts. “Frustrated, I went to the petrol kiosk, bought instant coffee mix and made them attempt it.” The café has since been serving hot drinks in absolute darkness, without incident.

“Working with the guides is similar to working with everyone else,” Glen says of the initial challenges when screening and training applicants. Those who go blind in adulthood commonly face esteem issues. After lessons and constant practice, these beneficiaries are required to pass a qualifying test before leading tours. If the standards are not met, their training will continue.

Unlike typical job interviews, paper qualifications are not a critical factor. “We assess their level of mobility and how comfortable they are with their own blindness and sharing their experiences with others,” says Glen.

DiD currently employs 19 guides, who also take on additional roles, from the planning of corporate workshops to logistics and troubleshooting. Glen encourages their continuous development, allocating a majority of profits from DiD back to the training and development of the guides.

“In 2009, a guide who joined DiD for only six months impressed a visitor enough to receive a full-time job offer in Marketing,” Glen recounts proudly.



Persistence pays off

DiD is largely sustained by participation from schools. As the first in the world to be located in an educational institute, Glen believes that DiD showcases a unique learning and teaching experience. “Lecturers from other faculties leverage on DiD to encourage research and help students understand issues like perception bias. Engineering students, for example, are inspired by their experience to create and develop assistive devices for the blind.”

Initially, the participation rate was slow as there was competition from other experiential learning options. DiD’s persistent outreach efforts to schools has paid off. Close to 40,000 people have experienced DiD so far, 70 per cent of which comprise school visits.

One school, Xin Min Secondary School, was even inspired enough to introduce DiD into their school curriculum.

In order to foster greater inclusiveness for the visually impaired community, Glen believes that there should be more recognition and understanding of the unique challenges faced by the visually impaired community in Singapore, especially from the public sector.

He sees the potential of DiD’s transformative experience as the key to realising this. “If you consider the number of visually impaired persons in Singapore’s population, our work here is far from done.”



Change of Perspective

At 27, Jason Setok contracted glaucoma, an eye disease that threatened loss of vision. Despite undergoing surgery twice, Jason, now 33, ended up losing his sight. For three years, he went into denial and refused to leave his house. With encouragement from family, friends and the help of mobility instructors, he regained independence and confidence. “Dialogue in the Dark totally changed my life,” Jason acknowledges, “I was inspired by what I heard in group sharing sessions.” Now it is his turn to inspire, as he takes part in DiD school outreach programmes and guides tours with confidence, fully embracing his new-found independence.

Seams That Bind

● Keep costs down. Keep grooming and growing a pool of volunteers. This twin approach that Mother and Child takes ensures more profits can be channelled to impact the ones who need them most – their beneficiaries, women in need.

Mother and Child is able to consistently pay these women “wages above the market rates,” according to founder Ms Anna Tsang. This is due in large part to their maxim of “keeping costs down and doing more with less.”

With lower costs and more volunteer helpers who chip in with the needlework or help to man booths at exhibitions, profits from Mother and Child can be maximised to sow and reap greater social impact.

Since 2005, Anna, a fashion designer, has been training disadvantaged women to sew her products, imparting useful skills while providing them with a steady source of income. At any point in time, there would be a core group of about 20 women working from home, and supported by volunteer helpers.

To date, Mother and Child has helped about 50 families, comprising mainly single mothers, women lacking in financial support and women recovering from mental illness.



MOTHER AND CHILD

“We need to empathise with their pain and struggles, along with their hopes. When the women are emotionally down, they cannot produce.”

Anna Tsang

“Social enterprise is not for the faint hearted!”

Anna, 55, understands first-hand how psychiatric conditions can hinder attempts at leading a normal life. At age 13, Anna suffered a mental breakdown. “My mother encouraged me to take up fashion design and I took on freelance projects as my symptoms interfered with my attempts at a regular job.”

In 1989, Anna came to Singapore. After a miraculous recovery at age 35, she decided that social enterprise was her calling. Volunteering with Singapore Anglican Community Services initially on “Something Old, Something New”, she later applied her technical training and factory work experience to the Mother and Child project.

Her personal traumatic experience has given her utmost understanding of the women she initially set out to help – those in the throes of recovery from mental illness. The group of beneficiaries has since grown to include single mothers and those in financial distress.

Readily identifying with the women that Mother and Child helps, Anna says: “We need to empathise with their pain and struggles, along with their hopes. When the women are emotionally down, they cannot produce . . . during the Christmas period one year, there was a last-minute crisis and one woman could not deliver the allocated products. I stayed up until five in the morning to finish the order.”



It's not social work!

Anna is quick to point out that social entrepreneurship is unlike social work because “you need to maximise profit margins and manage cost allocations, and you need to come up with a product people want to buy and teach a service that fits the market.”

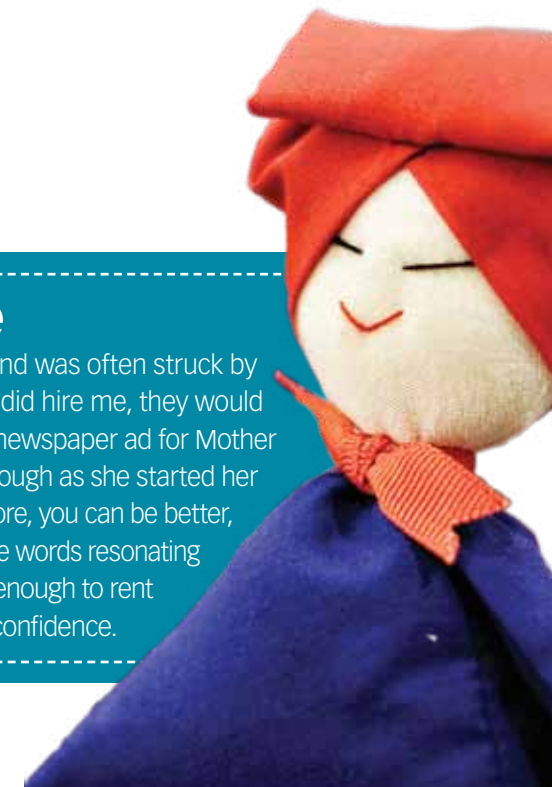
It is through ensuring financial sustainability that the social agenda can be pursued and furthered. She pays the women to help run Mother and Child booths at fairs, and tries to rope in volunteers, declaring: “I will only accept a booth if there is no charge, at a fair with the right crowd who will buy our products. Otherwise, I may lose money.”

Helping and impacting the beneficiaries is the overarching goal of Mother and Child. As Anna puts it: “We strive for the maximum impact. The harder these women work, the more money they get.”

For Mother and Child, the true test of continuity will come when Anna steps down by the end of 2012, as she plans to shift her focus to needy women in Cambodia. While she will still take up the role of a consultant, the pressing task is to bring in a Project Director to manage the different aspects of Mother and Child, including administration, marketing and quality control. Anna is confident that the social enterprise will continue to run smoothly, adding: “I will still be there if they need my help, as Mother and Child will always be close to my heart.” ■

From Depression to Independence

Medically unfit and depressed then, Ms Baldeep Kaur, worked at a slow pace and was often struck by panic attacks. “Other employers would not even interview me, and even if they did hire me, they would fire me after two or three days,” says Baldeep, 50. That was before she saw the newspaper ad for Mother and Child and decided to give it a shot. The year 2006 marked Baldeep’s breakthrough as she started her four-year journey with Mother and Child, whilst coping with depression. “Aim for more, you can be better,” encouraged Anna, the founder of Mother and Child. Baldeep persevered, with those words resonating in her. Today, not only can she independently manage a shop, she has also saved enough to rent a HDB flat for her family. “Both my sons are proud of me”, she says with renewed confidence.



Mantle of Blessings

● She was the daughter of the President of a bank. Her mother often attended functions with her father in beautiful cheongsams and exquisite pearls. Growing up, Ms Shelley Siu led a privileged childhood with her siblings, cared for by an “ah-ma-jie” who attended to their every need.

At 35, she attended University and became a sought-after corporate trainer, raking in big bucks. At 60, she could have eased into retirement. Yet, as a woman who felt the sting of discrimination in a patriarchal society, Shelley, 67, felt compelled to “follow her heart”, and embark on a mission to empower women.

“In those days, people felt that no matter how much a girl studied, she would still end up as a homemaker,” says Shelley, whose father “favoured sons” and “saved his hard-earned money” only for their education. “There was open discrimination; women from my generation tended to be financially more vulnerable, without an education. They depended on their husbands to support them.”

“I believe in flexi-hours because most of these women are caregivers or have medical conditions. They are dedicated workers who appreciate the work and wages. Sometimes, I have to urge them to go home.”

Shelley Siu



THE SINGAPORE SHAWL



Starting at 60

Driven to make a difference in the lives of those she terms “women in crisis,” Shelley set out to create The Singapore Shawl in 2003 as a social enterprise to train and employ needy women, cancer patients, stay-home caregivers and single-parents.

The Singapore Shawl produces hand-embellished shawls made from eco-friendly materials that cater to a high-end clientele. The brand is also built on the business principles of fairness and transparency, “which means fair trade, fair wages, and no forced or child labour,” Shelley points out.

The number of women Shelley has in her team varies, as the women may not always be able to continue working due to health-related reasons and competing duties. “I believe in flexi-hours because most of these women are caregivers or have medical conditions. They are dedicated workers who appreciate the work and wages. Sometimes, I have to urge them to go home.”

Having served a stint as the Head of Department for Home Economics in a secondary school, Shelley mentors and guides each of her beneficiaries personally, imparting first-rate skills that have earned them praises from customers, and given them back their dignity and pride.

Shelley recalls of an employee who later became her friend: “She was a quiet woman who had to support her family because her husband was ill, but she was jobless when I met her. She attended some of the corporate training workshops I conducted after she joined us, and now she’s confident and fearless. The customers love her. She’s a hit.”

Secure and Settled

Ms Xia Ya Mei, 63, praises Shelley, founder of Singapore Shawl, for her willingness to teach her painstakingly to hone her sewing skills. Just five years ago, Ya Mei vividly remembers feeling despondent, with no job, energy and passion. The Singapore Shawl provided her with flexible training and working hours, and today, Ya Mei is a happy and settled worker, enjoying a great sense of satisfaction in seeing customers wear her sewn pieces. What else does she love? “The job security and good relationships I enjoy with my boss and colleagues”, she quips.

“I am a supporter of the underdog, and will always be.”

Ever devoted to her social cause, Shelley admits that working with women in crisis is not always without hurdles. She vividly recalls an employee cum cancer patient who was too weak to step out of home for more than a year. “I would deliver the shawls to her and drive back again a week later to collect the finished products. Sometimes, it would take longer, depending on her condition, but everyone stood by her,” says Shelley.

Today, the Singapore Shawl includes royalties and dignitaries among its recipients and clientele and prides itself on the exclusivity and quality of the shawls: “Each design takes about two months to produce, and I have to love every piece before being willing to sell them,” says Shelley, the sole designer for every piece. “If a shawl needs jade sewn on to it, I personally pick out the piece before embellishing a shawl with it.”

The brand has also donated in kind to the Japanese Tsunami victims, the Red Cross, the Breast Cancer Foundation as well as the Singapore’s Medical Association Foundation. In addition, the unique pieces, such as crystal embellished shawls designed for Hong Kong singer Francis Yip, have been auctioned for charity for as high as \$44,664 a piece.

Despite receiving offers from interested buyers on the Singapore Shawl branding, Shelley remains firm that she “would rather let the women in crisis have my counters for free, staffed with other needy employees trained by me.” Indeed, Shelley has defined the true value of The Singapore Shawl: “It represents a mantle of blessings for women who need it – whether fashion and elegance, or as basic as a means of livelihood.” ■ s





A COMMITTED TEAM WITH A COMMON PURPOSE

FACTOR 3 Committed social enterprises possess an immense level of perseverance and passion, in their pursuit to realise grand dreams and bright ideas. This could only be possible with the presence of a steadfast and committed team, bound by deep camaraderie.

Dancing to their Beat

● The teen years can be tough years. You cope with pressures at school. You yearn for your peers' acceptance. You battle for your parents' approval.

Founder and CEO of O School Mr Kenny Low recalls the one thing which helped him pull through the difficult teen years: Dance.

"Dance helped forge my identity and gave me a window to express myself," he says. "The times I spent dancing during JC years were my most transformative experiences."

For the youths who are still struggling to find their identity, Kenny, 37, hopes the performing arts and dance school he set up in 2006 may be a sanctuary for youths to find themselves, and grow alongside new friends. "Many of them have trouble at home, or they struggle with their identities. I don't have counsellors to counsel them here. When the youths come to the school, they find something they can identify with, somewhere they can find acceptance and a sense of belonging. They can leave their troubles behind and channel their energies into the dance," he says.

"When the youths come to the school, they find something they can identify with, somewhere they can find acceptance and a sense of belonging."

Kenny Low



O SCHOOL

We are family

The desire to dance, if not channeled to right places, may easily land one in risky situations. Many street dancers frequent nightspots just to be seen by the right people, hoping to secure themselves a job to launch a career in the dance industry. "They hang out to dance night after night, even though that may not be the kind of lifestyle they want to lead," says Kenny. For these youths, O School is a place to hang out without the temptations of clubbing, drugs and alcohol.

Presently, the school has 13 full-time instructors, many of whom started out as street kids with a plain and simple love for street dance.

Starting out as a tiny dance spot at the NTUC Trade Union House, O School expanded to a bigger rental space in Bras Basah and now has its own spacious studio at *SCAPE. Every step of the way, the team has worked as one to achieve one milestone after another. "The growth has been fuelled by a thriving team spirit and camaraderie", says Kenny. "You see all these young people working so hard together to put on a good show, though they often don't even gain a lot materially. Yet, you see everyone coming together as a team, giving their blood, sweat and tears to perform with passion.

O School is about excellent dancing, but more than that, it's about family."

Dancers also do not just dance; it is important to Kenny that they are equipped with skill sets which prepare them for life, as "a dancer's career is often short-lived." They are trained to do administrative work, handle accounts or spearhead marketing and publicity. According to Kenny, "It is a huge responsibility because these people choose to follow you, and put their future in your hands. You can get them one to two thousand dollars a month, but how do you give them more than just money? That keeps me going."



Passion for Dance, Passion for Life

Just turning 20 this year, Ms Loy Xue Hui has already been teaching different dance styles, from jazz to reggae, at O School in the past five years. On top of that, Xue Hui also teaches dance in established schools like Hwa Chong International. Who would have thought that this spirited and driven girl had lived through her secondary school years in darkness and rebellion, where she often got into trouble and even failed her 'O' Level examinations? "I aimlessly mulled over what life was about and felt that it was hopeless," she recalls. Everything seemed dismal until Xue Hui was talent spotted by Kenny, the founder of O School, to be an instructor and performing crew. "Life became purposeful as I realised that I could dream and live big." Upon encouragement from Kenny and with a scholarship from City College, supported by O School, Xue Hui now continues to study while teaching dance, with a newfound passion for life.



Big dreams

The rise in social media has also helped to propel the growth of O School. "What YouTube has done for dance is similar to what radio has done for music," says Kenny. O School was the first dance school in Singapore to post recordings of choreographies online, and this spread like wildfire through sharing on social sites. "What I've found out is that people don't just want to dance, they want to be seen, and they want to be stars," observes Kenny.

With the emergence of platforms like the Integrated Resorts and School of the Arts, Kenny believes the performing arts will see an exponential growth. For both the local arts scene and O School, Kenny has big dreams. He is inspired by the Broadway scene in New York and hopes for that to be a reality for Singapore one day. "There is a whole street of performing arts schools in New York, people there spend all day going for classes or auditioning for parts," he says.

Kenny also wants to take O School overseas. "I want to come up with a curriculum which can be replicated anywhere because dance is a universal language." ■



Pathway to a Breakthrough

● It is about a brotherhood of men helping each other achieve that desired breakthrough. It is about giving one another strength and solidarity, in their battle to keep upright.

After all, they have each struck a deal with Breakthrough Café to stay committed and change for the better. In return, their employer gives them opportunities to regain their pride and confidence, and reclaim a dignified place in society.

Mr Freddy Wee, Deputy Director, Breakthrough Café, says “the package deal is ultimately aimed at preparing residents for social integration, upon their acceptance into our (Breakthrough Mission’s) rehabilitation programme.”

As part of the Prisons Halfway House scheme, a team of counsellors conducts interviews in prison to select suitable candidates for this programme. Those accepted into Breakthrough Mission’s structured rehabilitation programme receive training, teaching as well as counselling, and undergo observation for two to three months. The character and field of interest of each candidate are subsequently evaluated, after which 12 are selected to commence work at Breakthrough Café.

“To work at Breakthrough Café, the candidate needs to show that he is mentally strong enough to resist external influences, especially because of where we are located,” says Mr Freddy Wee, 59.

Breakthrough Café is located opposite the Subordinate Courts at Havelock Road. Those undergoing work therapy at the cafe often come face-to-face with familiar ex-prison inmates, who drop by after making a court appearance. Indeed, candidates undergoing work therapy at the cafe need strong willpower and an unwavering desire for a clean break from the past.



BREAKTHROUGH CAFÉ

“The residents understand each other, they know where they came from, they know how easy it is to give in to temptations and negative influences... they are motivated to help each other stay firm in the recovery process.”

Freddy Wee

Stay firm, stand strong

“The residents understand each other, they know where they came from, they know how easy it is to give in to temptations and negative influences . . . they are motivated to help each other stay firm in the recovery process,” says Freddy.

An ex-drug addict himself, Freddy understands the struggles of the residents to stay on the straight path. Having spent 21 months between 1977 and 1978 in the Drug Rehabilitation Centre, Freddy accepted the Christian faith after two years in a halfway house, and has been drug-free for over 30 years.

Success stories also abound of how ex-residents who worked in Breakthrough Café eventually found jobs in the food and beverage industry; others who picked up skills in the house removal department successfully secured employment in transport companies.

For the lives the Café has touched, Freddy is grateful for the support he has from his team, such as the Café's Executive Director Pastor Simon Neo, who has been part of the journey since Day One and is passionately committed to the residents' recovery.

Shares Freddy: “We started off as a small family-sized halfway house. At that time, Pastor Simon saw to everything personally, from running the

programmes to being a source of support and strength as the parental figure to the residents.”

Today, Pastor Simon lays out the strategic vision and plans for the future of Breakthrough Café.

All in a day's work

Having been with Breakthrough Missions since 1985, Freddy spends most of his time in the centre monitoring the programme, attending to problems and enforcing discipline.

“Some ex-convicts might still harbour a ‘gangster mentality’, wanting to get physically violent when conflicts arise at work,” he says.

Although Freddy is quick to lay down the law and declare that troublemakers will be reported to the Police, he admits that he usually does not take such action. “I believe in giving chances and talking things out,” he says. “Conflict, when reflected upon, can contribute positively to character development.”

When queried about personal challenges in running the social enterprise, Freddy admits to feeling low upon seeing some candidates who do not respond well to the programme.

His goal is to correct their behaviour and point them in the right direction. “My motivation comes from a passion within. As I have been changed, now I want to help them change.” ■



Derrick's Breakthrough

At 13, Derrick Ee was exposed to a destructive combination of wrong company, loneliness, and spare cash and time, which eventually led him to drug abuse. Coming out of jail for the seventh time at 36, Derek went through work therapy at Breakthrough Café. Two years later, Derrick is now thankful for the compassion and help shown by leaders at Breakthrough Mission. Promoted to the Senior Helper, Derek will be part of the full-time staff with effect from August 2012. “I always see my past self in those who come in, and want to give others a chance to experience the same changes I have been through.”





DIGNITY KITCHEN

Dreams Come True

● The camaraderie is clear to see. The visually and hearing impaired, autistic, single mothers, victims of spousal violence and ex-convicts all operate their own stalls in the hawker centre. Yet they are all committed to giving one another encouragement, sharing the common purpose of serving with pride and dignity.

As a pioneer hawker training school for the disadvantaged in Singapore, Dignity Kitchen has come a long way since its inception at Balestier hawker centre in October 2010, with only three food stalls. Today, Dignity Kitchen is a 13-stall, 14,000 sq ft food court in Tech View, at the heart of the Kaki Bukit industrial hub.

More than 90 per cent of the crew working at Dignity Kitchen are either physically or mentally challenged, or come from a distressed background.



“Each person has a specialised skill but we work together. Communication is key. Team spirit is vital. We make mistakes and learn along the way. We build a culture based on innovation and learning as everything in Dignity Kitchen was started from scratch.”

Kok Seng Choon



Calling became a mission

Parents of children with disabilities have wept in joy upon seeing their kids master the skills to run a hawker stall. "They never imagined that their dreams of seeing their children earn a living independently would come true," says Mr Koh Seng Choon, 53, Executive Director of Project Dignity.

This venture started taking root more than four years ago, with the words of a physically challenged man that kept ringing in Seng Choon's ears: "I want to be a hawker!"

Seng Choon (then Executive Director of Restaurant Association of Singapore), thought long and hard. Can people with disabilities become hawkers? What are the barriers? How can they pick up the necessary skills?

The calling morphed into a mission for Seng Choon, an engineer by training and management consultant by profession. His core team of like-minded individuals include Mr Yeo Heak Kiat, the Operations Manager with a strong F&B background and Ms Karen Tay, the Admin Manager who is a lawyer by training.

"Each person has a specialised skill but we work together. Communication is key. Team spirit is vital. We make mistakes and learn along the way. We build a culture based on innovation and learning, as everything in Dignity Kitchen was started from scratch," says Seng Choon.

Trainees at Dignity Kitchen have to first undergo a six-week hawker training programme on preparing and handling food, as well as equipment set-up and customer service. Students also get to practise in real time taking orders, preparing food and serving customers at their stalls.

"We train the disabled and disadvantaged to be hawkers, to make a living for themselves," says Seng Choon. "We don't just teach. We give them back their dignity and self-respect."



Going the extra mile

Seng Choon and his team modified stalls to suit the various disabilities – like Braille point-of-sale equipment for the visually impaired and a height adjustable hawker stand for the physically handicapped. This was done through inventive experimenting. The team also adapted from the MBA teaching curriculum to design the hawker training programme.

Sourcing for a suitable location took months. Seng Choon had to mortgage a commercial property to raise \$500,000 to fund the project. The Ministry of Social and Family Development has also stepped in to provide funding.

Dignity Kitchen's most popular offering is the Lunch Treat for the Elderly. Every day, the elderly needy from homes and senior activity centres are taken for a city tour and a lunch treat at Dignity Kitchen, while being entertained by musical performances put up by the beneficiaries. Such experiences for the elderly and needy have been fully sponsored by corporations and individuals, and more than 16,000 people have enjoyed such lunch treats to date.

There is a grand vision for Dignity Kitchen. "One day, I hope we can IPO Dignity Kitchen," says Seng Choon. "This would be the best way to promote social enterprise. We raise money from the commercial side to support the social cause." ■



Making a Living for Himself

"He (Seng Choon) is the best boss in the world!" declares Mr Tony Ng, 59. Tony has been a victim of polio since birth, a disease that cost him his independence and freedom. Once unable to seek gainful employment, Tony now runs the show at the Dignity Kitchen dessert stall. Says a beaming Tony: "I am very lucky to work here. It is not stressful because I am well taken care of. If we run into difficulties, the boss always tries his best to help us. The past year and a half has given me my confidence and independence back."

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES FEATURED



ADRENALIN EVENTS AND EDUCATION

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ALTERATION INITIATIVE

▶P.10-13

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Singapore 048622
Tel: 8228-0883

HAUTE ALTERATION INITIATIVE
333 Orchard Road
#03-20 Mandarin Gallery
Singapore 238867
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BETTR BARISTA

▶P.24-27

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BREAKTHROUGH CAFÉ

▶P.46-49

101A Upper Cross Street
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DIALOGUE IN THE DARK SINGAPORE

▶P.28-31

Ngee Ann Polytechnic
Block 5, #01-03,
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EIGHTEEN CHEFS

▶P.14-17

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Eastpoint Mall
3Simei Street 6
Eastpoint Mall #01-36
Singapore 528833
Tel: 6782 1298

Fusionopolis Way
No. 1 Fusionopolis Way
Connexis #B1-12/13
Singapore 138632
Tel: 6467 1296



MOTHER AND CHILD

▶P.32-35

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O SCHOOL

▶P.42-45

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PROJECT DIGNITY KITCHEN

▶P.50-53

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THE SINGAPORE SHAWL

▶P.36-39

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