

MyLifeMyWay

# Autumn, a time to harvest her skills

Ex-civil servant who started Dare to Dream scholarship is also a technopreneur



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Mrs Tan Shook Wah says there is a small, but distinct, difference in her life after bidding adieu to a civil service career that spanned 35 years.

"In the past, I woke up TO go to work. Now I wake up AND go to work," she says.

Obligation is implicit in the first sentence; choice is implied in the second.

Indeed, when the former director at the Ministry of Defence (Mindef) gave up full-time work two years ago, she was adamant about several things.

First, she intended to remain active. Second, she wanted to devote her time to pursuits that are both impactful and meaningful. And finally, she was determined that her undertakings would be well-paced and give her learning opportunities.

Mrs Tan, who turns 60 next month, is off to a good start.

Two years before leaving her job in 2015, she started the Dare To Dream scholarship, which helps special needs students who are facing financial difficulties.

And two years after leaving her job, she became a technopreneur. Earlier this year, she co-founded a start-up, The Smart Think (TST), which has pioneered a new technology to make lighter, safer and cheaper body armour and helmets.

Poised, trim and articulate, she shares the same birthdate - Nov 30 - as Winston Churchill, the famous British prime minister who died in 1965.

"I was born on the same day but am not as bright or prominent. Apparently, he was a dull teen but went on to become prime minister so I used to tell myself I still had hope," jokes the youngest of four children.

Her father, who helped to run his family's hardware business, died of a massive stroke before she was born.

"Mum was only 30 then. Fortunately, my paternal grandfather was a businessman and took care of us," says Mrs Tan who grew up with her grandparents and several relatives in a big brick house in a kampung in Ah Hood Road near Balestier.

Hers was an idyllic and, she readily admits, privileged childhood.

"The neighbourhood used to



flood and we loved it whenever it did. It either meant no school or we would get piggybacked by our amahs to the main road," recalls the former student of St Margaret's Primary and Singapore Chinese Girls' School.

As adroit in tree-climbing as the boys in her kampung, she was also a gifted sprinter and was once the fastest schoolgirl in Singapore.

According to a newspaper report in May 1974, she not only won the 100m, 200m and 400m events at the Secondary School Athletics Final Meet in Farrer Park, she also set two meet records for the 100m (12.9sec) and 200m (27.5sec).

"I've never liked the 400m because it's long enough for you to regret being in the event."

The idea of becoming a professional athlete, however, did not appeal; she was "living life at full throttle" with training, piano lessons and as an active member of the Interact Club.

"Education was also very important in our family," says the Raffles Institution alumna who went on to graduate with honours in sociology from the then University of Singapore.

An innate interest in people determined her course of study.

"I wanted to understand what people think, what motivates and drives them, why they behave the way they do," she says.

Mindef was the first to offer her a job after she graduated. She worked there for 35 years, in divisions ranging from human resource to international relations.

"I think 35 years is enough. Today, if you stayed on in a job for more than three years, people will say you're mad," she says.

One of her main reasons for giving up full-time work was to spend time with her two sons: a doctor, 28, and a web designer, 25.

"When I stopped working, both my sons separately told me it was so nice to have me home," says Mrs Tan, whose husband Adrian Tan is the head honcho of Ad Planet, Singapore's largest independent advertising group comprising about 10 boutique agencies.

"My response was defensive: 'No lah, I was always home.' And both of them said: 'No you weren't, you were here but not here.' That's the problem. You can be home physically and not engaged with them emotionally because your mind is elsewhere."

She readily admits that stopping work at 57 is a luxury not many people can afford.

"I'm fortunate because I was on the pensionable salary scheme. Through the years, we've saved. And I'm privileged and blessed because Adrian has a business."

It explains why she wants to do her bit for the less privileged. She has an especially soft spot for children with special needs.

"I had colleagues with kids with special needs. It was clear to me that those who were more privileged, not just with time and resources, but also those who were more aware and had greater knowledge and exposure, could offer their special needs kids more help."



Mrs Tan Shook Wah with some recipients of the Dare to Dream scholarship; (anti-clockwise from top left) Mr Alex Lim, 24, Ms Isabelle Lim, 23, Ms Shifa Solihah Azman, 20, Mr Jeremiah Tan, 22, and Mr Nico Tay, 24. The scholarship helps special needs students at Lasalle College of the Arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts who face financial difficulties. ST PHOTO: KIA CHEE SIONG

Mrs Tan Shook Wah co-founded The Smart Think, in February this year. The start-up has pioneered a new technology to make lighter, safer and cheaper body armour and helmets. PHOTO: TAN SHOOK WAH

bone development) to autism and spina bifida. Two of Mrs Tan's friends also came on board to sponsor the scholarship, which has been extended to special needs students at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

"The good story is how it ends," she says, looking and sounding pleased.

She cites the example of Ms Lim, who mounted a solo exhibition with her help last year at the Enabling Village. The freelance photographer will be holding another exhibition from Nov 23 to 30 at SPRMRKT Kitchen & Bar at STPI in Robertson Quay and donating the proceeds to the Today Enable Fund, which helps people with disabilities.

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Being a technopreneur, however, was not something she planned.

Mr Tristan Alexander, an Australian defence scientist and her younger son's friend, had been working on a new technology to make combat helmets and body armour which are not only safer but also lighter and cheaper to produce.

The patent-pending technology was developed over 10 years at Deakin University by a team of scientists from Australian defence science research firm Defence Mater-

rial Technology Centre.

Together with her husband, Mr Alexander and one other Singaporean investor, Mrs Tan set up TST in Singapore in February this year to commercialise the technology. The venture, she says, is meaningful to her because it deals with "protective" defence products.

"The keywords are stronger, safer and lighter. Soldiers don't have to deal with the burden of heavy helmets and body armour," she says.

"The technology is a world first. If we're doing something that someone has already done and it means we're competing, then no lah. But we are fortunate to have something unique and state of the art."

Being a technopreneur also ticks another box on her list. She is learning a lot on the job. "I do everything except serve coffee," she says, adding that the company is now busy trying to secure contracts.

Mrs Tan says she may be entering the autumn of her life but she finds it fulfilling. "To many people, autumn is fall. But to me, autumn is harvest. I'm able to harvest my skills, my knowledge and my abilities to influence and put them to different and good use."

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