

WOMAN ON A MISSION

Tan Wai Jia (Medicine '11) believes it's not about what you think you can do, but about what love can do through you. And she certainly walks the talk. **By Elisabeth Lee**

She has written and illustrated two books – *Kitesong* and *A Taste of Rainbow*. Her bicycle is named Faith. Asked who inspires her, she says Mother Teresa. Dr Tan Wai Jia has been on 15 — and counting — humanitarian trips.

In this present-day cynical world, the 24-year-old is a literal breath of fresh air, perhaps even a shocker. If not for the fact that the petite medical resident was seated across, sipping on a soy latte, this writer wouldn't have believed she was real.

But real she is, and with a plethora of undeniable achievements to boot. For starters, there are the numerous mission trips she has been on over the past eight years, while simultaneously battling anorexia and getting through junior college and medical school. Dr Tan graduated from the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine in July 2011 and is completing her residency at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

“Medical school inspired me to push my boundaries in impacting communities, not only through fundraising or building infrastructure or teaching — which are all important, mind you — but also through public healthcare and improving the physical and mental wellbeing of people,” says Dr Tan.

“It gave me the opportunity to meet many inspiring doctors such as Dr Tan Lai Yong and Dr Liang Wei

[Singaporean medical humanitarian aid workers] who could have led a luxurious lifestyle instead of living among the poor and helping them, using their expertise.

“That spurred me on to continue to put serving the poor as a top priority in my life.”

A global young leaders conference she attended in 2004 spurred Dr Tan on to an eye-opening volunteer trip to Cambodia. “I'd never been to a village or visited the poor [before]. This made me realise how much we can learn from the poor and about our social responsibility to help the less fortunate,” says Dr Tan, who is the younger of two daughters.

In January 2011, she was honoured by the non-profit group Orchid Jayceettes of Singapore as a Young Outstanding Singaporean.

Even now, despite the 100-hour work weeks and paucity of annual leave (seven days every four months), Dr Tan finds the time on every break to go on yet another humanitarian trip.

Tan Wai Jia with some children in Mozambique



Doing good, wherever she is

“You don't have to go overseas to make an impact,” she also says. And indeed, Dr Tan's humanitarian work doesn't end when she returns home.

During her first solo volunteer trip to Nepal in December 2005, she was heartbroken to discover that the children at Sophia's Home, the Kathmandu orphanage she visited, had to move every couple of months because the centre could not afford the rent. This inspired her to write her first book, *Kitesong*, about a child and her

runaway kite. Sales from the book in August 2006 of around \$110,000 enabled Dr Tan to buy the orphans a permanent home. Separately, she also raised funds for a \$100,000 cochlea transplant for one of the Nepalese children.

She has a new book *I Love You* in the works and has been giving talks about her second one *A Taste of Rainbow* which chronicles her past battle with anorexia.

The power of love

One future plan is a feeding programme for the orphans she met while volunteering in the port city of Pemba in Mozambique in early 2011. Dr Tan spent three weeks with the children, eating what they ate, to get a feel for what they were going through.

She was “deeply impacted” by the poverty there. Heidi Baker, a missionary in Mozambique, is the reason why the staunchly spiritual doctor headed to Pemba.

“Heidi's message is simple: ‘Love has a face,’” Dr Tan explains. “It's not about what you think you can do. It's about what love can do through you.”



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