

People

# Inspiration to us all

Some saved lives, others fought to overcome personal difficulties yet found it in them to lend a helping hand. They are the kind of people *The Straits Times* is seeking to recognise with a new annual award, ST's Singaporean of the Year. The award, supported by UBS Singapore, will be given out at the end of this year. To give an indication of the kind of individuals and their inspiring actions we would like to celebrate, **Olivia Ho** caught up with some whom we had reported on last year. If you know of others like them who should be recognised, do e-mail us at [stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg](mailto:stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg)



## He helps others 'put down roots'

For years, he wandered the earth, living off little more than what he carried on his back. But today, his endeavour to get his fellow urbanites to put down roots in their own land keeps free spirit **Tan Lai Hock, 52**, firmly planted in Singapore. He founded eco-community **Group-Up Initiative** in 2008 to create a "21st century kampung culture" in the heart of cosmopolitan Singapore. He helms a group of 40 to 50 active volunteers who cultivate a 26,000 sq m plot of land - about the size of three to four football fields - at the former Bottle Tree Park in Khatib. More than 35,000 people have passed through its gates, growing produce, honing skills such as woodwork, and practising sustainable living. Mr Tay and his team do not live on site, but take turns maintaining it, leading volunteers and holding community programmes for schools and companies. These, as well as the sale of some of the farm's produce, drum up revenue. Said Mr Tay: "We are not profitable, but we get by." The self-avowed "kampung chief" believes the environment will benefit from convincing Singaporeans to get their hands dirty - literally. "We live so high-rise our feet don't touch the ground," he said. The former regional sales manager for a US software firm gave up a five-figure salary in 1999 to backpack around the world. Settling down in one place was far from his mind at the time. But when he ended up leading a series of flood relief missions in Malaysia in 2007, he realised he had amassed a group of volunteers with the potential to enact change. Months of living in New Zealand eco-villages showed him the blueprint of how to do so. The transition has not been an easy one. His work means he can no longer travel for long periods of time. And the fight to keep the project going is a constantly uphill one, said Mr Tay, who is single. They almost lost their space recently, but managed to secure the new, bigger site in November for the next six years. Mr Tay and his team now aim to raise \$6 million to develop the land further into a "Kampung Kampus", starting with projects like a rice field. So far, they have raised about \$5,000 by getting people to sponsor bricks. Mr Tay admitted to doubts, especially when he comes up against volunteers who lack commitment, or visitors who litter. When he shared his misgivings on a volunteer WhatsApp group, however, a former volunteer sent him a message from the US, saying that he had just had an interview to study at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. If not for Mr Tay, the young man said he would probably be sitting in an office instead. "The seeds you sow take so long to see," said Mr Tay. "But it's moments like this that keep me going. I always tell people - farm your heart, and garden your soul. We're trying to create a utopia here."

Mr Tay Lai Hock (left) founded his eco-community to create a "21st century kampung culture" here. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

## A head for figures, a heart for others



Mr David Hoe emerged from the academic wilderness to become a respected youth and student leader. PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Mr David Hoe, 27, wants to teach at an elite junior college, but not for the reasons you might think. He said: "Whether you like it or not, these are the people who will be your policymakers... if they're going to run Singapore, they need to have a better perspective of what Singapore is like." Mr Hoe knows something about perspective, having traversed the spectrum of the education system. As a child, his ambition was capped at being a chicken rice seller. But he graduates this month with honours in economics from the National University of Singapore (NUS). After his parents divorced and his mother went blind, he spent his primary school days guiding her through the streets to sell tissues. She died of a stroke when he was 12, and he went to live with his father and older brother. With little time or inclination to study, he did poorly in the Primary School Leaving Examination and landed in the Normal (Technical) Stream. It was only when he discovered he had a knack for grasping mathematics formulas, and started helping his friends understand them too, that he developed a taste for educating others. He fought for a transfer to the Express stream, becoming the first student to make the switch. He also carved a path for himself through junior college to NUS, which he attended on a Ministry of Education scholarship. This year, he helmed the "I Am Talented" programme, which gave about 200 Normal stream students the chance to pursue their passions, like fashion design. He also served in a multi-agency government task force to tackle the growing problem of drug abuse among youth. He met The Straits Times fresh off a flight from South Africa, where he had gone backpacking for nearly two months. Mr Hoe wanted to visit the places he had known only as case studies. He said: "Economics can seem quite dry. I want to show my kids what hyper-inflation really looks like in Zimbabwe, what corruption looks like in South Africa." In Coffee Bay, one of the poorest parts of South Africa, he spent five days at an orphanage where the children ate two-month-old expired food. Concerned that they could not study at night because there was no electricity, Mr Hoe made a Facebook appeal for funds. He raised \$2,450 to buy solar panels for the orphanage, with enough left over to cover some expenses. "I never wanted to change the world," said Mr Hoe. "But when I see a need, I will meet it."

## She 'adopts' old couple as her parents



Ms Noriza A. Mansor mopping the floor of Mr Tan Soy Yong's flat. She spends at least six hours a week helping him. PHOTO: DISS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Single mother **Noriza A. Mansor** gets only one day off a week from her job as a bedsheet promoter. Most would use that day to rest, but she spends it looking after an old man she met by chance as he stood in a Toa Payoh supermarket soiled by his faeces. Ms Noriza, 49, made headlines last October when she stepped forward to help Mr Tan Soy Yong, 76, who had soiled himself while buying groceries with his wife, who was in a wheelchair. Others had recoiled from the old man and his stench. But Ms Noriza not only bought him new shorts but she even knelt to wipe the dried faeces off his legs - an act which moved bystanders to tears. Since that day, she has made it a point to visit Mr Tan for at least six hours a week at his Potong Pasir three-room flat. Mr Tan has lived there alone since the start of the year, when his wife, Madam Lee Bee Yian, also 76, was hospitalised for cancer. During her visits, Ms Noriza cleans up Mr Tan, who cannot control his bowels, and washes his soiled laundries. She also mops the floor and tidies up the flat, while chatting brightly with him in a mix of Malay and Hokkien. Some days, she will accompany him to visit his wife in hospital. On other days, he will take him out in his wheelchair

## He risked his life to save others in blaze



Football coach Faizalulami Noorali saved five people and a cat from a fire at an HDB block in Choa Chu Kang last year. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

When a Choa Chu Kang Housing Board flat burst into flames and terrified residents fled en masse, one man ran in the opposite direction. On discovering the February 2014 fire, football coach **Faizalulami Noorali** immediately ran from door to door to warn his neighbours. Racing up and down several flights of stairs, the 34-year-old saved two elderly women, two maids and a little girl. He even rescued a cat. When *The Straits Times* caught up with him more than a year later, he was downplayed his deeds. "I was just doing something a normal human being would do," he said. That morning, he had spotted smoke coming out of an eighth-storey unit. The heat made him hesitate, but the thought of somebody being trapped inside spurred him to break a window pane. Recalling the thick black smoke that billowed out over him, he said: "I had to squat down to avoid the smoke. I almost lost consciousness then." Despite inhaling some of the smoke, Mr Faizalulami went on to rescue others, including a 63-year-old housewife on the 14th floor and his fiancée. As she refused to leave without her cat, he had to search her flat and catch the feline. On the 11th storey, he found a 76-year-old woman lying in the corridor with her maid crying helplessly next to her. He carried the elderly woman down and, despite his fatigue, went back upstairs, returning with a five-year-old asthmatic girl in his arms. His acts have got him recognised by strangers, not just in Choa Chu Kang but also in the new restaurant he is helping his friend manage, and even on one occasion by Singaporean tourists in Batam. Mr Faizalulami said, however, that he did not always cut such a gallant figure. A rebellious youngster, he was even involved in a secret society at one point. He said: "In the past, I didn't think about other people. If this had happened 10 years ago, I would have been one of those bystanders taking a selfie with the fire in the background." His outlook changed after he met his girlfriend of 11 years, Ms Faizureen Ashiqueen. "She's my real inspiration," he said. The 32-year-old educator was not amused by her fiancée's heroics, though. Mr Faizalulami said she broke down on learning how he had risked his life. The couple are getting married next month, and plan to move into a new flat five minutes away from Mr Faizalulami's family. Their first step on setting up house? "Get fire insurance," said Mr Faizalulami.

## Stroke won't keep her from helping workers



Ms Bridget Tan, who founded advocacy group Home, is still helping foreign workers as she recuperates after a stroke in Batam. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

After suffering a stroke, **Ms Bridget Tan** moved to Batam to recuperate in peace. But she still gets calls at all hours from migrant workers in Singapore desperate for help. The 66-year-old, who has used a wheelchair since the stroke, rearsures them with a five-year-old asthmatic girl in his arms. His acts have got him recognised by strangers, not just in Choa Chu Kang but also in the new restaurant he is helping his friend manage, and even on one occasion by Singaporean tourists in Batam. Mr Faizalulami said, however, that he did not always cut such a gallant figure. A rebellious youngster, he was even involved in a secret society at one point. He said: "In the past, I didn't think about other people. If this had happened 10 years ago, I would have been one of those bystanders taking a selfie with the fire in the background." His outlook changed after he met his girlfriend of 11 years, Ms Faizureen Ashiqueen. "She's my real inspiration," he said. The 32-year-old educator was not amused by her fiancée's heroics, though. Mr Faizalulami said she broke down on learning how he had risked his life. The couple are getting married next month, and plan to move into a new flat five minutes away from Mr Faizalulami's family. Their first step on setting up house? "Get fire insurance," said Mr Faizalulami.

## 'Barefoot doc' reaches out to foreign workers



Dr Tan Lai Yong plays sepak takraw with migrant workers at Westlite Dormitory in Mandai Estate on June 25. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Dr Tan Lai Yong spends his Saturday nights playing sepak takraw with migrant workers at their Mandai dormitory. His goal is really to set up a subsidised clinic there, where he will train workers to volunteer on weekends and help diagnose their own countrymen. He would rather start out, however, by kicking around a ball with them. "This is what leadership is - it's not charity. I want them to learn to play sports rather than parachute in as a doctor," said the 54-year-old. "This way, you form a multi-layered relationship that builds community." Before he moved back to Singapore in 2010, Dr Tan had spent 15 years as a "barefoot doctor" in rural China, moving there with his wife and 16-month-old daughter. In the impoverished countryside of the Yunnan, he ran village clinics, cared for orphans, lepers and the disabled, and gave farmers basic medical and dental training. In Singapore, he confronted a different set of needs. He said: "In Yunnan, I entered into communities. Here, I am trying to create community. It's an uphill struggle." Today, he serves as director and outreach and community engagement at the College of Alice & Peter Tan in the National University of Singapore, where he lives with his wife, son and daughter in campus housing. He also volunteers about four to six hours a week at non-profit group **HealthServe**, which runs subsidised clinics for migrant workers here. He often takes his students on field trips, be it to visit migrant workers at **HealthServe** clinics, young tai foo sellers at **People's Park Food Centre**, or the back alleys of Geylang. "This is what leadership is - it's not charity. I want them to learn to play sports rather than parachute in as a doctor," said the 54-year-old. "This way, you form a multi-layered relationship that builds community." Before he moved back to Singapore in 2010, Dr Tan had spent 15 years as a "barefoot doctor" in rural China, moving there with his wife and 16-month-old daughter. In the impoverished countryside of the Yunnan, he ran village clinics, cared for orphans, lepers and the disabled, and gave farmers basic medical and dental training. In Singapore, he confronted a different set of needs. He said: "In Yunnan, I entered into communities. Here, I am trying to create community. It's an uphill struggle." Today, he serves as director and outreach and community engagement at the College of Alice & Peter Tan in the National University of Singapore, where he lives with his wife, son and daughter in campus housing.

## Ex-gangster wants to inspire the young



While in jail, Mr Darren Tan decided to turn his life around and study hard to realise his childhood dream of becoming a lawyer. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Growing up, Mr Darren Tan wanted to be a gangster or a lawyer. The Hong Kong TV dramas he grew up on usually revolved around one or the other. "I chose the easier way out," the one-time gangster said. He was 13, he took to drugs and violence, which earned him 10 years in jail and a life sentence. An epiphany in prison inspired him to pursue his other childhood dream, which saw him called to the Bar last August. Now 26, he has been a fully fledged lawyer for almost a year at **TSPM Law Corp**. While in prison, at 23, he was locked up in a maximum-security cell after having fought with another inmate, and he began to question the point of his existence. He describes the cell: "The walls are black, and there is a lone yellow light shining very strongly, bouncing off the walls. You feel very stunned all the time, and you have no concept of day or night." "All my friends were in prison, on the run, or dead. I told myself that, even if I died there, nobody would care." For the first time, he prayed to God for a chance to turn his life around. He took up his studies and gave them his all, showing them that "someone like them" was able to follow his dream.