

“We can listen more and learn about their challenges, so they are empowered and encouraged not stigmatised and judged”

From the Ground Up

The daughter of Pontiac Land chairman Kwee Liong Tek, Melissa Kwee is chairman of Millenia Hotel and director at her family company. But instead of resting on her family's well-established name and business, Kwee is deeply involved in the community service field, where she has not only sat on various fundraising and charitable organisations' boards, but also set up a host of different foundations, including Project Access in 1996, and Beautiful People in 2006. As former president of UN Women, she helped tackle child sex tourism and human trafficking.

The causes she chooses to champion run the gamut from inculcating leadership skills in young people to setting up a recruitment

programme to aid migrant workers, but for Kwee, it all “comes from a value of looking at individuals and communities that have not had as many opportunities to express and reach their potential”. She adds, “I have always been attracted to issues and people that were under-served, hidden or marginalised. I follow the model of Jesus who loved the poor – to Him, this was not about material possessions but poverty of spirit. Whether migrant workers, teens and families affected by crime or poverty, or individuals discriminated against for reasons beyond their control, I believe there is something we can do to change the situation. We can listen more, we can learn from them about their challenges, we can help identify and build up their gifts and resources, we can speak differently about their situation so that they are empowered and encouraged, not stigmatised and judged.”

This belief led her to set up Beautiful People, an initiative under the Beyond Social Services umbrella that helps teenage girls transition from rehabilitative homes back to school, work, their homes and community. Through a mentorship programme, Big Sisters guide and equip their Little Sisters with necessary tools and skills for easier assimilation into society. Says Kwee, “We mobilised volunteer mentors who believed in being part of a solution to systemic poverty, chronic under-achievement in schools and broken families. We are clear that we are one family. No one is better or worse than another, we are all valued and broken in our own ways – and so we are part of the same body that is working together to build up the whole.

“We have over 60 active mentors each year working with four homes and a growing family of Big and Little Sisters. We help with financial education, life skills, job skills, and promote family bonding and reconciliation.”

The recipient of Youth Award for Community and Youth Services from the National Youth Council of Singapore says that currently, she sits on the boards ITE, Crest School and Prison Fellowship, organisations that she would like to contribute more to. Her future plans, however, include “resting more and empowering more team members by investing in their dreams”. ■

COMMUNITY LEADER

LEFT
Melissa Kwee is involved in several foundations that help the needy, and that construct a framework for a better community

