



The Do Gooders

Five sterling personalities show that Christmas isn't the only time to do good.

By Patrick Benjamin, Terry Ong, Ramesh William and Yong Yung Shin



It's the Christmas season once more and the spirit of giving and sharing hangs heartily in the air. Businesses, government bodies, schools and a raft of organizations are the midst of their festive charitable causes. Even the common person steps out of their 11-month malaise to help their less fortunate brethren. But doing good, whether it's in the form of volunteerism, eco projects, giving alms or donating basic staples, can go well beyond the holiday season. We profile five high-flying do-gooders who spend all year making a difference to the lives of those around them.

Pam Oei: Hospice Volunteer

Local thespian Pam Oei is more popularly known for hamming it up on stage as part of raucous cabaret trio, The Dim Som Dollies. But in the following interview, she sheds light on a little known facet of her life that is just as important as her showbiz career.

When did you first start volunteering?

I started out volunteering with the Assisi Hospice, my pet charitable organization, in 1999, a year after I had witnessed how they cared for my cancer stricken mother. The caretakers' concern and love for her during her battle with the illness (and her eventual death) moved me to start thinking about contributing in my own little way. During the same period, the death of a close friend's two-year old child from meningitis also made me reflect upon life and triggered my involvement with volunteerism.

So what exactly do you do for Assisi Hospice?

My activities with the Assisi Hospice are somewhat related to my role as an entertainer. With Maggie Lim, a good friend and radio DJ, who has also adopted Assisi as her pet charity, I have been hosting their annual fund raising dinners. I also help out in other Assisi related charity activities such as their Celebrity Dunk-A-Thon to raise much needed funds.

Any suggestions on how the average Singaporean can be more altruistic in these turbulent times?

Speaking from my own experience, an individual will start helping only after they've experienced a life-changing event. In my case, I would not have become a volunteer, if I hadn't seen the genuine sacrifices of the Assisi staff during my mother's struggle. Anyway, what's really important is a potential volunteer's belief in the cause and vision of the charity that they intend to volunteer with. Despite being very selective of my projects, I do have moments when I get tired doing volunteer work.

What do you think about Christmas being the season of giving?

The mass consumerism of Christmas has made me dislike this festive season but I think it's a great time to spend in the company of your cherished ones.



Pam Oei

Melissa Aratani Kwee: Charity Founder

Melissa Aratani Kwee founded Beautiful People (www.beautifulpeople.org.sg), a volunteer project that helps delinquent girls, in 2006. Last year, she was conferred the Singapore Youth Award for Community and Youth Services. She is also the chairperson of the Halogen Foundation, a non-profit organization that runs leadership education in schools.

Why did you start Beautiful People and what is it all about?

Girls form only 25 to 30 percent of the delinquent population, and thus a lot of reintegration programs are male-focused. There was a real need to reintegrate delinquent girls into society using a gender sensitive approach.

Our aim is to imbue the girls with self-esteem; we want them to see that there is more to their future than just getting pregnant. The girls who come to us mainly have problems with addiction, or are from extremely poor backgrounds, or from single parent families and broken homes.

It's important that the girls don't think of themselves as charity cases or victims. Instead, we want them to believe in themselves and become strong, resilient individuals who have goals and dreams, and who are capable of making a contribution.

What are some of the initiatives organized by Beautiful People?

We run camps for the girls and these are always oriented towards helping the aged; the girls are performing for, doing things for, making things for, or befriending people who are in the last stages of their life.

This December we'll be going to the The Gift of Love Home, one of Mother Theresa's charities, which is a home for the destitute. Most old people there have families that are unable to support them, and because they are very poor, most have never had good photos taken of themselves. The girls will be extending this small gesture: taking photographs and making photo frames (the girls are very talented with their hands) for the seniors to cherish in their dying days, and also to use at their wake, if they wish.

We also provide career guidance and financial planning to the girls. We teach them how a business works (margins, revenue, budgeting, marketing, profit and loss, etc.) and later put this theory into motion in a practical setting—our girls will have a Beautiful People Christmas stall at VivoCity from December 20-24 selling costume jewelry, which they've made themselves.

What can Singaporeans do to be more altruistic?

One needs to adopt an attitude of thanksgiving to be altruistic; you have to know how blessed you are. If you are able to be grateful and can appreciate the great and small mercies in life, then your attitude towards others changes. We live in an era where we're constantly told that we don't have enough; we need to be slimmer, taller, more attractive. We're always bombarded with how much we lack, so it's counter cultural to ask the other question: What am I grateful for.

What are the main challenges a charity faces in Singapore?

Singaporeans are very generous with money. But the challenge is finding people to come forward and be mentors, helpers and friends to those in need. The dominant mindset here is to be economically productive; it's very hard to quantify the economic productivity of volunteering, and people see it as an either-or: "Either I work and make money or I volunteer and I lose money," rather than: "I work to fulfill my life's ambition and I volunteer because it adds an intangible quality to my life."



Melissa Aratani Kwee