

A HIGHER CALLING

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They say it takes two hands to clap. But in the case of The Learning Connections (TLC), an arts-integrated learning organization, something far more extraordinary is required – a pair of exceptional women who share a noble vision for the greater good. TLC co-founders Ms Elaine Ng and Ms Juliet Chia say: “We believe that all children must be given equal opportunity to be exposed and engaged in the arts from the early years. Arts education is essential for the development of the whole child.”

While technically a business, the term social enterprise would be a more appropriate description of TLC. The two kindred spirits met six years ago at a preschool organization, and quickly realized that they had much in common despite their different areas of expertise. “The thing about the current preschool education system is that we see a lot of compartmentalized learning,” says Ms Ng. “To us, learning should be a seamless integration of knowledge and skills across all domains and it’s all about meaningful connections not only with the children, but also their parents and educators.”

Three years later, they established TLC, a harmonious blend of Ms Ng’s vast experience in early childhood development and Ms Chia’s stellar business development skills. Its carefully crafted outreach Theatre Arts education programme offers preschool children from 2-6 a strong integrated arts experience that incorporates drama, music, dance and visual arts. TLC also produces “live” edutainment shows performed by professional stage actors such as Storybook Theatre for preschool-age children and National Arts Council (NAC)-approved primary school assembly plays like Aesop’s Fables, promoting the arts to build children’s imagination and creativity.

Ms Ng and Ms Chia strongly believe that every child, regardless of his or her background, should have the opportunity to experience and learn about the arts: “He or she should be exposed to the inspirational world of theatre, dance, music drama, art, imaginary tales and literature that will transform their lives!” Hence, they initiated their community project, Connecting Hearts Through Arts, in 2011.

TLC’s push to promote a holistic cause is a breath of fresh air. A few preschools already incorporate TLC’s theatre arts programme into their core curriculums, with more than 30 others island-wide offering their arts education programme as an optional enrichment. But the founders are aware more needs to be done: “Even though we have made some progress, the journey ahead is still a long and winding one.”



Up Close & Personal

What are some of the challenges you face?

People’s mindsets. We constantly have to justify the importance of the arts to parents and school operators as they are not aware of the values. There is this idea that the arts is more for entertainment; they want to see a tangible product and immediate results, but to us, it is a learning process and the development of life skills that we want to instill in children to help them cope with the 21st century challenges.

How did the both of you decide that a social enterprise was the way to go?

We didn’t start The Learning Connections because we wanted to do business. It was borne out of pure passion to make a difference in the lives of children. Even in our society today, arts can be perceived as elitist and only the rich can indulge in it, leaving disadvantaged children out in the cold. We want to make the arts accessible to all because we are aware of the unlimited

benefits and the transformative power that the arts can bring.

How far do you think passion can take you?

We believe passion is a fundamental ingredient we need to have in anything we do. In order to succeed, people who join our team or whom we partner with must also share our vision and support our cause to reach out and make a difference because passion is motivation! Businesses need not be “cold” and rewards do not always have to be tangible or in monetary gains. The arts is about feelings, relationships and connecting hearts.

Have you managed to find the right balance between passion and creating a sustainable business?

TLC is a business with a heart. The things we do stem from one common belief – to better the lives of children. We will have to continue to find that perfect balance.

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