

“ A Moment of Madness”

from Chicken Soup for the Singaporean Soul

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“What do you mean you don’t think you have any strengths?” was what I asked of Geraldine when I sat with her after one of my polytechnic talks.

Geraldine, 17, was the Emcee of the event I was speaking at. We wound up having a chat after the event and our conversations journeyed towards what she was good at. Her first response was “I don’t have any strengths” with a frown on her face.

I began asking her about the various things she has done and asked her to share one moment she was really proud about. And the more she shared about how the team she led in Secondary School won the first prize for a competition, the bigger the smile she had on her face.

“You see, you do have something that you are good at. In fact, I think you have a whole lot more.” She smiled.

Often, we see so little in ourselves when we’ve got so much to be proud of. Sometimes, we wait for the big news item before we pat ourselves on our back but it is normally the small things we accomplish in life that needs celebration.

Young people have so much in them that they can and should be proud of if only we as influencers in their lives choose not to focus on their weakness but their strengths.

SOMEONE asked me recently how did I start Halogen Foundation (*formerly known as the Young Leaders Foundation*) in Singapore. My answer? In a moment of madness.

Well, not madness in the sense that I should not have started it, but rather the immense magnitude of starting a not-for-profit organization from ‘ground zero’ at the age of 26. On hindsight, it now seemed rather audacious, ambitious and idealistic.

I was at my prime age, poised to do well at my work that I love. I had recently got married, bought a house (which really means a huge mortgage) and was studying part-time doing my Bachelors of Arts in Mass Communication.

At an age where most of my friends are wheeling and dealing in the corporate world, climbing the lucrative corporate ladder, I was doing the exact opposite. Starting a business is not new considering the buzzword in Singapore in 2003 was “Entrepreneurship”, but a

not-for-profit enterprise? That was another thing altogether.

Start one when you are retired, as most would say. Go into the corporate sector and see the world, earn your millions and then think about the world when your bank account is full. Lots of well-meaning advise from well-meaning people. But I'm just different.

I guess I've been like this since young. Different.

Always vocal and trying new things, my dad started putting my in a computer class in a now historical institution called Microskills. I was one year younger than everyone else. Even when I joined The Boys' Brigade, I was one year younger than all my peers.

I was always outstanding in school. But it was not because of my results - I was outstanding because I was always standing outside the principal's office.

I was bored at school and never liked doing homework. Hence, I've never really handed in much homework - which meant I was often asked to stand outside class or the principal's office as punishment.

While everyone pursued a Junior College education or an engineering diploma or business administration diploma in Polytechnics, I studied film, sound and video.

After National Service, all my friends from my class entered the film industry. I started work for a church. My life journey thus far has been unconventional or different.

I was asked on a radio program how the journey was starting HFS and I replied with one word - tough. It wasn't an easy journey but nevertheless an exciting one.

It started with my friend Jeffrey Yip (Jeff). We have been friends for a couple of years from church. When he came back from a young people's conference in Australia in 2002, he started talking to me about starting a similar foundation - one which runs events for young people that focused on leadership.

Jeff talked about how exciting the events were and how passionate the team was in Australia. I was then working for RiverLife Community Services, a church-based volunteer group and youth was our main focus. What he mentioned to me kept ringing in my mind/ears, and finally we gave it a shot.

I corresponded with the founder of the Australian Foundation Matthew Martin in our course of discussion about the possibility of having Halogen Foundation in Singapore. We ended up being really great friends. We shared the same vision for young people and the same passion for what leadership can be. What is this vision, what is this passion? What about leadership?

On 20 August 2003, we registered Halogen Foundation Singapore officially and planned for our first event in October. Without much fanfare, HFS started with Jeffrey and I being

the first volunteers of the organization. Our first purchase was a fax machine, and that was how we started.

We started with two volunteers, two interns, a fax machine, an office at my house and the first batch of 1000 students. Three years on, we have four staff, five members on our Board of Directors and over 100 volunteers, over 17,000 students and thankfully, a new fax machine.

The growth has been phenomenal but so have the challenges.

It became evident that in order for HFS to grow, we needed to someone full-time to manage and lead the organization. Discussing first with my wife, I decided that I would take the plunge into the unknown by being the first full-time Executive Director of HFS with a starting salary of \$0.

I didn't know if there was to be any money in it. I asked my wife Daphne if she would let me try for 6 months with the focus on making the Foundation financially viable. I had to assure her that if I cannot find the funding within 3 months, I would start looking for a job elsewhere.

Thankfully and gratefully, we secured seed funding from HF Australia and soon after National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) in Singapore, which put us on a more stable footing.

As I look back, there were many times that I told Daphne that we may not be able to make it. Getting sponsors to support a not-for-profit organization that focuses on leadership development wasn't that tear jerking for sponsors to consider favourably.

Having a relatively young Executive Director didn't help the cause either. But we chugged along. We manage to get people to believe in us and our cause. If for anything else, I think they were convinced not so much by the vision but by the passion and determination we had as a team to make this work.

I remember the times when I had to design a marketing flyer, send for mass photocopying at shops at Bras Basah, go over to the McDonalds next door to insert into envelopes for sending out.

I remember one event where Daphne and I standing at the back of our car outside the Beach Road Post Office sticking stamps on the mailers for schools at 3pm under the hot sun. She was three months pregnant.

There were many times where our team of volunteers stayed over at the office cranking out folders till 5am for our school training at 8am. Our volunteers would set-up for our events the night before till about 1am and coming back the next day at 7am for tech-run and preparation for Young Leaders Days.

We had volunteers who took leave from work during the week to come into the office just to make phone calls to schools to share about the events.

It was a truly enjoyable ride. I guess it is such stories that have become legends at Halogen Foundation. Team members share such stories with new volunteers that comes in with pride and often, amusement and amazement of how we actually survived all these while.

We also have lots of fun as a team. We eat together a lot. We hang out and go for movies together. One of our team member's wedding recently was organized and run by fellow team members, much like how we did for the Young Leaders Days.

I'm forever grateful to the staff and volunteers of HFS that believed in our cause enough to put in so much effort and energy into the Foundation.

As a team, we have overcome many difficulties, obstacles and struggles. We also had a whole lot of fun, food and memories. Most importantly, we have the very thing that challenges us to go on in our mission of inspiring and influencing a generation of young leaders who will lead themselves and others well. It is the very young people themselves we are inspiring.

The smile on their faces after each event as they leave. The conversations they have with us about the lessons they have learned, and the encouragement from teachers all but gives us enough fuel to make our programs even better.

In one of our country leaders team meeting in Sydney, we went around the table sharing why we are involved in youth leadership development and not anywhere else in the corporate world. All our answers interestingly have a common denominator. Someone in our growing years believed in us and never gave up on us. There was that one or two individuals in our lives that made a tremendous difference by simply choosing to see the strengths on our lives and not lamenting on our weaknesses and flaws.

Today, we choose to do the same. We want to repay the debts we owe the previous generation, by serving the next.

Three years of sheer hard work and many more good years to come. If someone were to ask me how was it? I'll still say the same thing. It was a memorable moment of madness. It is this same madness that we are moving forward.

Martin Tan