PHILANTHROPY

Pioneer in successful ageing

Tsao Foundation's Mary Ann Tsao defines success as making mainstream their efforts to address longevity issues

By Genevieve Cua

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AN interview that she hadn't applied for landed Mary Ann Tsao in a pilot programme for young doctors to serve inner city communities in South Bronx in New York City in the 1980s, an accidental assignment she now calls "heaven sent". The experience of serving underprivileged communities sparked the proverbial "fire in the belly" and steered her towards public service. "I thought, I didn't sign up for this, but it's interesting. It was not just about medicine, but medicine as a vehicle to serve human needs in the community… When you become a doctor you get exposed to different life circumstances. You start to appreciate how some things are just intolerable, the way some people live. It's just not right.

"There is this fire in the belly, you have the feeling that something is unjust and wrong and you have to do something about it."

She describes the environment in South Bronx in the 1980s as "urban decay at its worst". "Slum landlords would torch buildings to get insurance money. Babies get burnt and it's par for the course… Yet this programme and hospital were committed to serving this community. You see that within this depravity, there was amazing human strength too. Grandmothers holding three jobs to make sure there was food on the table, that children were clean, and trying to get them out of the poverty trap.

"I thought, wow, it was humbling in the highest order, and the path became clearer. I was a doctor, but I thought my goal was community care, how to make health a vehicle to create better circumstances for the community as a whole. So I was pretty committed to public service by the time I was in my 20s." She was a paediatrician.

Today Dr Tsao leads the Tsao Foundation. Established since 1993, it is a pioneer in addressing longevity issues, and establishing community-based medical and psycho-social healthcare. Today its taglines – "Longevity is opportunity" and "Successful ageing", among others – are now part of common lingo in the drive to address and support Singapore's ageing population. Just this year, the government announced a S$3 billion "Action Plan for Successful Ageing" – an initiative that Dr Tsao views with no small measure of satisfaction. At the National Day Awards this year, Dr Tsao was herself awarded the Public Service Star.

The ethos and mission behind the Tsao Foundation is credited to her grandmother Tsao Ng Yu Shun who started the foundation when she was 86. At the time when her grandmother called her home to work on the foundation, Dr Tsao was running her own medical practice, serving mainly well-to-do patients, and also poorer patients who paid her in kind when they didn't have the cash. "I loved it and I really grew as a person because people trust you with their most precious thing – their child."

She recalls the time she spent running her practice with some fondness. Her family, she says, was supportive. "I'm lucky enough to be born to a privileged family. I've never known poverty. I can only observe... The motivation and responsibility to provide service becomes even greater, because I'm the one born with a silver spoon. In Chinese families they groom sons (for business), so for a daughter to be a doctor was honourable. My father supported it.

"In my family there isn't a lot of entitlement which is good. When I finished my training, I got a job, and lived off the pay."

Her practice was started with the help of a US$10,000 loan from her father. "That period taught me a lot about running a business. You have to be viable, sustainable. It was a very good lesson for me."

She says it was already obvious in the early 1990s that Singapore's population was rapidly ageing. But addressing ageing issues wasn't a priority among policymakers then. It was, however, Mdm Tsao's deeply held conviction that something ought to be done.

"She was insightful. She said modern society was unkind to old age. She came from a privileged life, but in her wisdom she saw that society was changing. In retrospect I think she saw the issue as one of loss – the loss of roles of older people.

"Previously as an older person, your words were taken very seriously. But increasingly there was a lot of emphasis on youth. Older people lost interest in their roles in family, society and the community."

For her service and dedication to seniors, Mdm Tsao was honoured at a global conference sponsored by the United Nations in 1999. The occasion was the first UN Year of the Older Person. She died in 2001.

Setting up the foundation, Dr Tsao recalls, was a steep learning curve. "To have a good foundation required several things. One is to have a clear sense of purpose. I was lucky because my grandmother was still alive and I was able to find out what she really wanted. I learnt about her life, valuable lessons from past generations. Those days were precious."

The second requirement was governance. In the early days, board members comprised aunts and uncles. "I thought we needed a proper board. We're a business family so it's not an unfamiliar thing. I convinced my family we needed more independent board members, and that was good because we had good guidance on the board level."

PHOTO: TSAO FOUNDATION

DIFFERENT STROKES
Drumming (top left) and painting with Hua Mei EPICC participants

At the time of its founding, there were few charities focused on ageing. "Had we been a grant maker, there would have been no one to give a grant to. This was also very much a family business thing – we decided to do it ourselves."

The Tsao Foundation today is an Institute of Public Character which means it can raise funds from the public. But it relies mainly on its own principal funding source, the Tsao Ng Yu Shun Trust, in addition programme grants and donations matching from the government. "My grandmother's idea was that older people should be able to live the life they want, in the homes they want, with the people they love, and to be able to make decisions for themselves. It's what we do every day, except they're older, and we supported that."

The foundation's work is broadly three-pronged. One is to enable ageing-in-place through community-based health and psycho-social services. This is done through the Hua Mei Centre for Successful Ageing.

Two is training. "We recognised from the start that we couldn't run services because we couldn't hire anyone... We had to build capacity." The Hua Mei Training Academy is dedicated to training in the areas of community-based age-care, informal and family caregiving, as well as practitioner training and education.

Third is advocacy through research and collaborations. This is done through the International Longevity Centre Singapore. "Ultimately we want to connect the needs of the community to the stakeholders. How do we take what we see and tell the story in a way that's meaningful to policymakers? We dreamt of a series like the expert series programme where we think of an issue, bring an expert in, and the seed would be so big no one could ignore it. It was gutsy because we didn't know anyone.

"Basically we rode on the coat-tails of big-name thinkers. We ran programmes, lectures, dialogues. How to provide social care at one end – building capacity in terms of people providing care, but also reaching individuals like ourselves to improve our ability to prepare. And, of course, connecting community to policy through research."

How does the Foundation measure success? The government's S$3 billion action plan, for one, is in many ways an endorsement of its 22 years of work. "Yes, when the minister announced the package, to me it was a reflection of a bit of success. What we had been advocating for actually got into the system."

She adds: "If I serve my patients, and that's all I can do, that's fine. But from the foundation's perspective, it's not enough. Change is written into our DNA. We don't aspire to be the biggest provider of anything. It's not how we're built... We don't have an infinite amount of resources so we have to be strategic about where we put our money and which programmes we develop.

"Ultimately success is to mainstream what we do, whether it's a service like home care, programmes we piloted or shifting the system.... Looking back, I think we've achieved some success in individual patient care, service modelling and some influence on policy." W

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