

A heart for others

THE FAMOUSLY PRESS-SHY MEILEEN CHOO OF CATHAY ORGANIZATION OPENS UP ABOUT HER INVOLVEMENT WITH THE LITTLE SISTERS FUND IN NEPAL

BY CLARISSA TAN



MAKING A DIFFERENCE Meileen Choo was attracted to the Little Sisters Fund because it suited the low-key manner in which she wanted to give back to society

The line from Kathmandu is remarkably clear. Trevor Patzer, winner of the Unsung Heroes of Compassion award, is interrupted only by the piping voices of children greeting him in Nepalese. It is Bhai Tika, a festival where Nepalese girls pay homage to their brothers.

“I know this sounds like a very male-centric society,” he says. “To a large extent it is true. But many people here are also willing to support the girls. What we do here can make such a difference.”

Patzer, who hails from Idaho, is the founder of the Little Sisters Fund, which gives long-term scholarships to poor Nepalese girls who otherwise risk being sold, stolen or forced into prostitution. Through a fateful turn of events, Singaporeans have become heavily involved in this fund, with their contributions amounting to a quarter of all donations, says Patzer.

A couple of days later, Patzer is joined in Kathmandu by Meileen Choo, executive director of Cathay Organization. The famously press-shy Choo has been a keen supporter of the Little Sisters Fund for four years, and this is her first trip to meet the children her money has helped. She agrees to an interview with BT as it will help put a spotlight on the Fund.

Other major Singapore donors include the Lee Foundation, which also recently sent a representative to Nepal, as well as individual participants, some of them prominent business people.

Sponsors of Little Sisters, or *bahini* in Nepalese, are encouraged to commit to funding a girl through her primary and secondary education with a one-time donation of US\$3,000. Alternatively, they can give US\$1,000 a year for three years. All donations go directly towards educating *bahinis*, who are carefully selected according to their desire for an education, intelligence and family support.

The funds also go into providing transport, lunch, books, uniforms, school supplies and an annual gift of clothing – helping families feel more secure in their daughters’ self-sufficiency and thus removing the motivation to marry their daughters off early or sell them to brothels.

In Nepal, about 7 per cent of girls are married by age

seven, and 40 per cent by age 14. Nepal is the per-capita largest exporter of girls to the sex trade worldwide.

Patzer himself knows how crucial education is to changing one’s future – at 13, he was offered full tuition by a family friend if he were accepted at St Paul’s, one of the world’s top boarding schools whose alumni includes 2004 US presidential candidate John Kerry. He pursued the application, was accepted, and the family friend paid for his high school education.

“Education can change your stars,” he says. “You could become president. And female education is very, very powerful. If you educate a girl, you educate a family, a generation, the country, the world. She’ll make sure her children are educated, that her community is educated. Mothers are the most important people in the world.”

Choo says she had become involved with the Little Sisters Fund after one of her many trips to Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet.

“I was in Kathmandu in a shop. The shop owner had a little girl from a village who was maybe 10 years old. The girl was both a playmate and maid to the owner’s son, as well as a helper in the shop.

“I wanted to sponsor the little girl to school and knew that Trevor had this programme in Nepal, so I contacted him. We tried to get her an education but the shop owner absolutely refused. And rightfully so – what business was it of mine to come and interfere with his servant? However, I realised from this experience that there are

many places in the world where girls are treated differently from boys and have little or no opportunity to be anything but servants, prostitutes, and so on.”

Choo is typically modest about her role in the Fund, but Patzer says she has “totally transformed the organisation through her commitment”.

“Since her participation four years ago, the number of students we are supporting has jumped to 700 from 100,” he says. “She wants 75 per cent of her annual donations to go to endowments, which were set up for the long-term sustainability of the programme. She is very, very forward-looking.

“She has supported us for four years and has pledged for an additional six. To know that we have money coming in allows us to plan for the future.”

Choo says she was attracted to the Little Sisters Fund, which was founded in 1998, because it suited the way she wanted to give back to society. “I trust Trevor and I trust that he knows what he is doing,” she says. “He and his helpers have been doing this quietly for a while; there is no glory-seeking here. Being very low-key myself, I liked that. And I am not a ‘burn the bra’ type of woman’s libber, but I do believe that girls and women are important.

“Long ago, I realised we can’t help everyone. Just go to India and you will ask yourself – where does one even start? I don’t have that kind of financial capacity or time to help everyone, so I decided that I should help where I can make a difference. So these days, at the beginning of every year, I choose 10 charities, mainly children and old folks, to make donations to. I prefer to help my staff’s children or people I actually know.

“Organising gala dinners and charity shows is not for me, as we all march to the beat of different drums.”

Patzer will soon get an award for daring to march to the beat of his own drummer. In April next year, he will receive the Unsung Heroes of Compassion award, which is given to select individuals every three years for their quiet efforts in helping to improve society. He will meet the Dalai Lama, who will give him a special blessing.

“To me, the Dalai Lama is the personification of compassion,” he says. “If it’s one thing I want, it’s to have gratitude and compassion toward others.” ♦