

PAYING IT FORWARD

Generous with his time, Tan Chin Hwee is ever ready to give back to society in every way possible

HIS CAREER HAS been nothing short of illustrious but sit down and chat with Tan Chin Hwee and you find he rather talk about what he does outside of work — all for good reason. The Asia-Pacific CEO of Trafigura Group, one of the world's largest commodity trading companies, has a fierce passion for giving back to society.

Tan's earliest act of charity was running a camp for delinquent children and teens at the Salvation Army's Gracehaven home, while he was studying at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). "It left a strong impression because we were also asked to mentor the kids. That opened up my eyes to what we could have done together as a society to help [them]."

More than 20 years later he has come full circle, serving on a board in the university that champions social work among students. "We want to motivate them to do just one act of kindness every year, such as giving tuition to kids at neighbourhood schools."

His charitable streak could be attributed to his humble beginnings. Tan grew up in a one-room flat in Toa Payoh, which he shared with his parents and two siblings. His life changed when he

was awarded a scholarship at 19 from the Chua Chor Teck Memorial Fund in 1991. "I have been given many chances by different people, so I owe it to them to help others," he explains.

Mentoring aside, Tan has his fingers in other areas. One is distributing necessities to those living in one-bedroom apartments. "It started as a group of friends challenging one another to do this. We call it 'Ho Peng You' since we also get to spend time together socially," he says.

Tan was also involved in the setup of the Premmies Fund with the KK Hospital Health Fund, to help parents with premature babies cope with the financial burden. This was inspired by his own daughter entering the world two months earlier than expected.

Active even at the national level, he recounts a meeting he had with Ng Ling Ling, Assistant CEO of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) and Managing Director of Community Chest (ComChest). "Back in 2015, we got together over fruit juice at the Ghim Moh Market & Food Centre to chat about how the private sector can work together with NCSS to explore untapped areas."

ComChest, which is the fundraising and engagement arm of NCSS, picked up the idea and piloted a quarterly donor engagement series known as Venture Philanthropy Partners. It resulted in a gathering of socially motivated high net worth individuals who are successful in the financial, investment, start-up and medical arenas. As a "super-connector" himself, Tan was instrumental in tapping his network and convincing them to participate.

During the meeting, these individuals, who had corporate or personal foundations and looking to make social impact, connected with ComChest. This resulted in the co-creation and enhancements of several social projects and programmes.

One of them was Project Elevate, an initiative launched last year by NCSS and ComChest that aims to engage 540 students over a three-year period. Tan played a key role in persuading the Trafigura Foundation to support it.

Students are challenged to lead and execute community projects in service of less privileged groups using skills they have acquired during their course of study. As part of the process,

they are guided by social service professionals, volunteers and industrial partners, who play the role of mentors and facilitators to help them make meaningful contributions with the skills they are learning.

Outcomes in the short- to medium-term are positive relationships that last beyond the project: An improvement in their skill sets and an increase in the ability and willingness to contribute to society. Long-term outcomes include the knowledge that the students are supported in their studies, greater motivation towards school, and improved prospects of employment or further education.

Other supporters of Project Elevate include the Quantedge and Lorinet Foundations, led by Tan's former mentee Chua Choong Tze and his colleague Pierre Lorinet respectively.

Already, volunteers and mentors have expressed their own joy in observing how engaged and excited the students are at being able to translate their curriculum into useful projects that benefit the community. Many students also continued to volunteer long after the first run of Project Elevate ended, says Tan.

This is a good example of a 3P-partnership, with collaborations among public, private and non-profit organisations. Tan feels this is the best of all worlds in solving complex social problems. "It harnesses the strengths and complementary roles of the three parties, and drives more creative and innovative solutions faster. When convened and facilitated well, each party brings the assets it has that the others may not."

To him though, there is a bigger motivation to be involved: To get youths to start giving back to society early. Remarks Tan, "If we produce individuals who don't even care about the community, then I think we have failed."

HAIR: SEAN ANG; MAKE-UP: ANGEL GWEE

