

PEOPLE

The definition of a social enterprise is a business that does social good or fulfils a need – and makes money at the same time. BENITA AW YEONG finds out that it is a fine balancing act



**TRAINING:** Miss Ivy Low (right) teaching a maid how to help someone who is choking.

TNP PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

# Finding the happy social medium

**Watching nervous caregivers struggle to look after recovering patients at home inspired Miss Ivy Low's nursing consultancy business.**

Says the trained nurse, 30: "Despite years of nursing education, when I had to first handle patients at a hospital, it made me fairly apprehensive.

"For family members or even domestic helpers who have not gone through formal training, the task of looking after a discharged patient is daunting."

As Miss Low sees it, there is little support for caregivers here. Tired and stressed out, they may not have time to go for classes at clinics or hospitals.

Miss Low and her fellow nurses make trips to homes to specifically train caregivers.

"The home environment is very different from a hospital ward, so it is more effective for training to be conducted at home," says Miss Low, whose company, WhiteAngel Caregivers, has trained between 600 and 700 caregivers so far.

The session, lasting between two and three hours, costs \$210 each.

There is also a 24-hour phone consultation service for her clients, so that they can ask questions about their patients.

Miss Low's is a for-profit business. Most of the money comes from a caregivers training grant, which families can apply for. It is dispensed by the Agency for In-

An idea worth nursing

tegrated Care, which comes under the Ministry of Health. The agency covers \$200 of training costs per year.

Miss Low waives the \$10 co-payment that low income households are required to pay under the caregiver training scheme.

Next year, WhiteAngel will start a new series of training programmes for single mothers and active seniors on effective and practical skills in caregiving.

"These people may need part-time work to supplement their family income. They can stand in for caregivers when the latter need a break," says Miss Low.

She wears a white dress, similar to a nurse's uniform, when she visits clients in their homes.

She trains them on the side effects of various drugs, and how to shower a stroke patient, among other skills.

At a Yishun HDB flat two weeks ago, Miss Low coached an Indonesian maid on the life-saving measures in case her employer, who suffered a stroke, chokes. She then moved on to instruct her on the functions and side effects of the pills stashed in a plastic bag in the kitchen.

"These pills have a side effect of possible gastric bleeding, so if that happens you need to get the patient to a hospital right away," she says in a smattering of Malay.

"I learnt (Malay) from the different caregivers I had trouble communicating with," says the bubbly woman who can also speak Mandarin, Hokkien and Teochew.

Although her business is not lucrative by any means,

meaningful moments abound. She recalls teaching the family of a dying man how to care for him in his last days.

"He was about 101 years old, and wanted to die at home. So I went to his place and taught his family how to clean him, change him, and even note the signs of his last moments.

"At his last breath, they were all prepared and surrounded him. They were very grateful and really appreciated being able to spend his final moments with him," she says.

And if that is not enough, Miss Low and the three nurses she works with volunteer to give health talks at senior activity centres on issues like dementia and precautions to take to avoid falling.

"We often have to buy souvenirs with our money, including pens, coffee sachets and key chains, in order to entice them to attend," she says with a laugh.

Miss Low, who is single, admits that running a social enterprise is not as romantic as some may think.

**"I started out wanting to help people and saw patients for free. I even felt embarrassed telling people I actually charge for my training services, and as a result didn't pay myself for a year," she says.**

"Then I realised it wasn't sustainable. Social entrepreneurs need to know that it's not wrong to try to work towards profit while helping others," she says.

For more information, go to [www.whiteangelcare.com.sg](http://www.whiteangelcare.com.sg).

**Their breastfeeding product business had been doing well, and bosom buddies Juliet Chan and Valerie Ng were itching to give back to society.**

So they launched Mums Massage in January this year, an extension of their core business Mumsfairy, which sells breastfeeding products online and in maternity stores.

Mums Massage is a home-based service which employs women from disadvantaged backgrounds as post-natal masseuses.

Says Madam Ng, 33: "We try to offer flexible work arrangements for the women, who are often single mothers or have husbands who are in jail.

"They are unable to hold full-time jobs but have to make ends meet while taking care of young children or elderly parents."

Their company employs three women, who were referred by social workers from family service centres, as massage therapists.

"Those who do not have any experience at all must be trained for about a month before they can take on assignments, which are free of charge to the client, in order to gain experience.

"After that, we move them to highly discounted assignments. When they're finally ready, they take on regular sessions," says 36-year-old Madam Chan.

The women take up to three assignments a day, performing lymphatic draining massage and wrap therapy, which helps in post-partum recovery.

Customers pay between \$480 for a five-day package and \$700 for a 10-day package. Each session, performed once daily, takes between one and 1½ hours.

The therapists, who are in

their 30s to 50s, make between \$1,000 and \$1,500 a month.

They declined to be interviewed for this story.

Says Madam Chan: "One of the women told me that she was feeling rather depressed having to stay home all day.

"She mentioned that she was looking forward to working with us and helping out with her family income."

Having the trust of a strong network of mothers helped the duo get started on this venture.

The pair, who are certified lactation consultants and mothers themselves, began their entrepreneurship journey seven years ago by importing breastfeeding equipment and selling them on their online store.

They also conduct breastfeeding courses which are open to the public.

"Our massage business benefitted from having a ready pool of clients, who know us because of Mumsfairy," Madam Chan says with a grateful smile.

Still, getting the word out was not easy at first.

"We had to offer the massage services at a heavily discounted price for the first eight months. After deducting the women's salaries, we didn't earn much," says Madam Chan.

But things are looking up.

"We hope to expand into providing prenatal massage some time next year, and reach out to more women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"We also want to provide breastfeeding workshops at highly discounted rates to women who need it," says Madam Ng.

For more information, visit [www.mumsmassage.com](http://www.mumsmassage.com).

**BOSOM BUDDIES:** Madam Valerie Ng and Madam Juliet Chan



Massage boon for single mums

## A fairly new phenomenon

Social entrepreneurship has taken off in Singapore and around the world only within the last couple of years, says Professor Wong Poh Kam, director at the National University of Singapore's Entrepreneurship Centre.

The term refers to the process of setting up an enterprise that aims to solve a specific problem faced by society.

A shift in value perception, coupled with growing awareness among the younger generation about social and environmental issues have driven the rise of social enterprises, he says.

"People are exploring a larger meaning of life which goes beyond pursuing material wealth."

Iconic social entrepreneurs like Professor Muhammad Yunus, who founded Grameen Bank – a bank for the poor which requires no collateral – have enjoyed significant media attention. This increases awareness in gen-

eral. Assistant professor of economics from the Nanyang Technological University, Dr Leong Kaiwen, makes a similar point: "Most people I speak to about social enterprises hear about this term by either reading about it in the papers or hearing about it on the radio."

Says Prof Wong: "We are seeing a rise in interest in social enterprises here. For example, at the recent Start-Up@Singapore business plan competition which concluded in May, we saw that 25 per cent of the

entries were social enterprises."

This is up from 22 per cent the previous year, the first time the competition had a separate category for social enterprises.

The increase in interest spurred the centre to partner with DBS Bank to launch another start-up competition that aims to raise awareness and build a culture of social entrepreneurship in Asia.

While most of us think of such companies as profit-making businesses that provide employment or benefits to a needy sector of society, Prof Wong says the defini-

tion is broader than that.

"They can range from those organised as non-profit that rely almost completely on charity, grants, or volunteers, to profit-making businesses which plough surplus back to business growth and widening social impact."

Dr Leong, who runs a social enterprise helping ex-offenders start a business, points out that there are misconceptions surrounding such enterprises – some may think they are easy to operate and bring many benefits. "One of the core functions of any enter-

prise is talent retention and recruitment. But a social enterprise does not have this luxury. It is constrained by the fact that it has to hire those in need," he says.

As a result, social enterprises are typically not as competitive as normal enterprises.

"Unless some benefit is offered to social enterprises to offset this disadvantage, whether in terms of grants, subsidies or corporate tie-ups, it will be difficult for them to compete against regular, for-profit enterprises," he says.



**EVENT:** A Be Movement social fair at Alexandra Retail Centre in April.

**Part of Miss Cassie Lim's social enterprise is about promoting other social enterprises.**

The 36-year-old, who used to be a business journalist, is the founder of Be Movement, a tri-annual publication featuring social enterprises among other topics.

The first issue, launched in October last year, is the result of months of effort as well as about \$100,000 of her savings which she pumped in to produce the ad-free bookazine (a cross between a book and magazine, as she explains it).

Two partners joined her later and pumped in their own money for the second issue.

She exchanges copies of the publication for space at shopping mall atriums where she organises fairs for social enterprises to sell their wares.

The bookazine is also sold in bookstores for \$18.90, and is given out to companies and embassies here.

So far, she has held six social fairs in shopping centres like VivoCity and Somerset 313.

Each fair showcases between five and eight social enterprises, which typically sell items like handicraft or ethnic clothing and accessories.

They pay a small appreciation fee for the space, says Miss Lim.

"Besides giving them exposure, our design team also creates video clips which explain their stories. These are not only aired at the fairs but on their websites too.

"We do this at no cost because social enterprises typically don't have the budget of \$5,000 to \$10,000 to hire a professional to do it for them," she says.

Her team consists of 14 people, which include two women from low-income families, who help to sell the publications to bookstores and work at social fairs.

"We hired a single mother with five kids. It helps that the hours and work arrangements are flexible for them," she says. The rest are volunteers or freelancers.



She promotes other enterprises

The company also hires senior citizens to man the booths, and pays them \$6 to \$7 an hour.

"The malls use our books as gifts for customers who spend above a certain amount. In exchange we get rent-free space," she says.

Miss Lim, who has not earned a salary for the past 1½ years, says she is looking forward to receiving her first pay cheque later this month.

"It's the lowest salary I've earned but it is one I receive with the greatest fulfilment."

She is candid about the fact that she and her partners have not recouped their initial cost of producing the publication.

But a \$50,000 grant from the Ministry of Social and Family Development, disbursed via a social entrepreneurship programme, has helped to defray some costs.

Still, she is looking forward to building a sustainable business model as opposed to running a charity.

"We hope to tie up with corporations who might want to be interviewed, then sponsor their stories in our publication about their efforts in the area of corporate social responsibility," she says, referring to the main source of revenue she is hoping to develop.

The well-spoken and confident woman quit her job after an epiphany of sorts – she was caught in an earthquake in Japan in March 2011.

"I dashed out of my service apartment down the wrong staircase, discovering that it did not lead to the fire escape. The door was locked, and I wondered if this was it," she says.

"Then I started laughing hysterically and thought to myself, 'so what if I wear nice clothes, or live the high life? If my life ends now, I would not have done anything to contribute to anyone.'"

She hopes her bookazine will continue to celebrate the intangibles in life.

For more information, go to [www.bemovement.com](http://www.bemovement.com).