

8 saturday people



“A lot of people think STTA is very rich, but our expenses are very high with players training overseas, and we also have 60 to 70 staff and coaches... The biggest worry for me is always money.”

LEE BEE WAH • 18



NEO CHAI CHIN
chaichin@mediacorp.com.sg

She provides the tools for the “heroes in the world” — teachers — to do their jobs better. The teaching aids, in the form of colourful children’s books and training workshops, may seem commonplace and taken for granted in pre-schools and primary schools in fortunate countries such as Singapore.

But in some of the most rural areas in the world, they are not easy tools to come by, and they have helped provide a better education for seven million children since 2000.

Still, the woman instrumental in making this happen reckons she has an easier job than teachers tasked to hold the attention of a class of fidgety children.

“I’ve taught in a classroom, not as a teacher but as a volunteer, and it’s a really hard job to keep 60, 70 kids’ focus, keep the lesson plan, ensure everyone is learning. It’s not easy!” says Ms Erin Keown Ganju, 43, the co-founder and Chief Executive of Room to Read, a non-profit organisation that fosters literacy and gender equality in education in Africa and Asia.

Its literacy programme establishes school libraries, publishes original children’s books in local languages and supports teachers with resources to teach reading and writing more effectively.

“I think (teachers) really should be treated as heroes in this world, and our goal is to help give them more tools and techniques,” she says.

A WAKE-UP CALL

The daughter of a university professor father and social worker mother, it might have seemed a no-brainer that Ms Ganju would champion education in the non-profit sector.

But it was serendipity, she says, over our brunch chat at The St Regis Singapore. Her first job out of college — after getting a master’s in international relations and economics from Johns Hopkins University — in 1992 was as an investment analyst with Goldman Sachs, where she gained “practical skills” such as the ability to analyse information well and to read financial reports.

A subsequent stint in Vietnam with consumer products giant Unilever, just as the country was opening up to foreign direct investment, made her realise that she enjoyed non-profit work. “We had done a school project with Unilever to help build community

goodwill, and I realised that was my passion. I didn’t really want to work in business, I wanted to do the non-profit side,” she says.

Still, she did not make the switch until years later, after being laid off from a Silicon Valley technology start-up. The year was 2000. The tech bubble had burst, and it was the “wake-up call” Ms Ganju needed.

“I realised I didn’t really care if people shopped online, it wasn’t really my passion. And so, it helped me to re-evaluate what I really wanted to do and focus on the fact that what I loved the most was when I was working in Vietnam on more non-profit work,” she says.

ONE GIRL AT A TIME

Combining forces with former Microsoft executive John Wood — whom she had met in San Francisco and was running a project to provide books to children in Nepal — they decided to take a year off to see if they could secure enough funding and support to make their new calling in life sustainable.

They succeeded.

Today, Room to Read has a staff of 600, a footprint in 10 countries in Asia and Africa, and an annual revenue of nearly US\$50 million (S\$61 million). It has established more than 1,500 schools, 14,000 libraries, and distributed more than 11.5 million children’s books.

The pace of growth has been blistering, but a scalable model replicable in a wide range of communities was their aim from the start.

“I’d worked for big multinational companies and so doing something small just didn’t feel sufficient. At the end of the day, 793 million people are illiterate, two-thirds of them are women and girls. So just doing something that would help 100 or 200 kids was not enough.”

Realising along the way that fewer girls in the communities they worked in stayed in school, the duo made gender equality another focus.

The Girls’ Education programme provides scholarships, for them to remain in school, as well as female mentorship and life skills training. “Every year, a girl stays in secondary school, her earning potential increases by 10 to 20 per cent,” she says.

Ms Ganju, in town to raise awareness and financial support among Room to Read’s Singapore volunteer chapter, shares how she recently brought investors to Vinh Long province in Vietnam and visited the home

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THE ST REGIS PERSPECTIVES

CHAMPION FOR GLOBAL LITERACY

The success of an award-winning global project to foster literacy owes much to the corporate-world savvy of its co-founder and CEO, Ms Erin Ganju

PHOTO: DON WONG

Champion for global literacy

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of a scholarship beneficiary, Phung.

At the age of about 14, Phung was already the head of a household, hav-

ing lost her father early on and her mother in a boating accident last year. She supports her mentally disabled sister and young nephew by beading embroidery for slippers for US\$1.50 a day.

Phung told Ms Ganju and the visitors that the life skills workshops were most powerful, enabling her to manage the household budget and equipping her to speak confidently. "I was in tears leaving her house," says Ms Ganju, eyes turning wet as she speaks.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Putting their financial and tech backgrounds to good use, Ms Ganju and Mr Wood have moulded Room to Read into a dynamic entity that adopts the best practices of the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

Its top global corporate funders today include Barclays, Goldman Sachs, Bloomberg and Symantec, although 70 per cent of funding is derived from individual donors.

“He’s involved in making sure I’m supported at home ... As you know, in any busy job, your whole family is a part of it. So he spends a lot of time ensuring I can be out here telling the Room to Read story; he makes sure home life is still a good one for our daughter.”

Ms Erin Ganju
ON HER HUSBAND'S 'INVOLVEMENT' IN ROOM TO READ

Ms Ganju projects the air of savvy deal-maker, caring leader and do-gooder in equal parts.

She rattles off key statistics on global illiteracy rates and her organisation's achievements as effortlessly as she speaks about individual lives that have been impacted by Room to Read and her efforts to retain and develop staff.

She proudly discloses that it has been awarded Charity Navigator's highest four-star rating for sound fiscal management for six years in a row — something only 3 per cent of the charities rated achieve. Of every dollar donated, 83 cents goes directly towards the work of Room to Read.

More than eight in 10 of its staff are locals in the communities it operates in, and the employees on the ground work closely with local governments to identify schools most in need of support.

Demand is vast, with 1,000 communities identified that want Room to Read's involvement. The organisation ventured into Tanzania this year, and now wants to grow a US\$5-million seed fund to launch in Indonesia.

Fishing out a fact sheet with key figures from Room to Read's post-completion study of its school libraries — 98 per cent of the 517 libraries evaluated were still functioning on their own after its support had ended — Ms Ganju says: "We believe what gets monitored gets done."

These days when she travels for work in the summer, she takes her daughter Julia, who is nearly seven, along. It is a wonderful way to bond and for Julia to "understand the world around her".

Asked if her husband, 48-year-old Mumbai-born biostatistician Dr Jitendra Ganju (they met through a dating website in the San Francisco Bay area), is involved in Room to Read, Ms Ganju says with a laugh: "He's involved in making sure I'm supported at home ... As you know, in any busy job, your whole family is a part of it. So he spends a lot of time ensuring I can be out here telling the Room to Read story; he makes sure home life is still a good one for our daughter."

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