

Never say die – that's Seet Ai Mee

Quiet force behind hospice movement is no stranger to life's hard knocks



Judith Tan

Her short three-year political career had ended with a handshake in 1991.

Former politician Seet Ai Mee lost the election after allegations that she had washed her hands after greeting a fishmonger in a market while campaigning.

About a year later, her marriage of about 30 years to Dr Seet Lip Chai, the former chief medical officer of the Singapore Armed Forces Medical Corps, ended in divorce. They have two children.

But just when life threw Dr Seet Ai Mee these curve balls, an unlikely source presented her with a lifeline.

"Working in hospice services has given me one extra dimension. That extra dimension is a sense of

spiritual fulfilment," said Dr Seet, 68, now the president of HCA Hospice Care. "So thus began the journey of 20 years."

And Dr Seet, the quiet force behind the hospice movement today, has never looked back.

She said that in a fast-ageing population, where the fragile elderly with debilitating illnesses need constant care, there is an urgent need for hospice services, and that she came into the work from "out of the blue".

"Dr Jerry Lim, my GP (general practitioner) and a very good friend, had returned from a visit to New Zealand and was very impressed by the work there. At that time, I had stepped down from politics and was looking for something to do," she said.

She was then thinking of two possible areas of need – homes for the aged and hospices – but was not clear which one to pick.

A dinner with former permanent secretary for health and director of medical services Kwa Soon Bee helped her make up her mind.

"He was very clear when he came up with two reasons why I should pick hospice work. The first was I am a Christian, so the taboo of death and the superstition of death does not exist for me – he knew that and I knew that. The second reason he gave was, 'Because you are you,'" she told *The Sunday Times* in a recent interview.

"Dr Kwa told me that I was a very passionate but a very impatient person, and that an aged home is a very long slow process of degeneration. With a hospice, the timeline is shorter," she added.



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Dr Seet Ai Mee (standing) with patients at her hospice. She said she came into hospice work from "out of the blue", having been asked by a friend of hers to set up the Dover Park Hospice shortly after she had left politics.

And that comment made her pick up the phone and tell Dr Lim: "Okay, Jerry, hospice it is."

So the two of them set up the Dover Park Hospice, a charitable organisation providing palliative care for the terminally ill. Land for the premises would be provided by the Government. This was in 1992.

But she admitted that taking the first few steps had not been easy.

When news first broke that the proposed Dover Park Hospice might be set up at the junction of Dover and Clementi roads next to the Singapore Polytechnic campus, the poly's management, staff association and students' union appealed separately for it to be located elsewhere.

"I was really really sad then. Some of these people are who I called my friends, teaching at the poly," Dr Seet said, heaving a long sigh.

"But these things don't dampen my enthusiasm. Instead, it gave me an injection, a boost to take it up further. Knocks push me harder, make me even more challenged to

do something about it. So I actually went to see the then Minister for National Development Richard Hu, but was told that the decision (to move the hospice from Dover Road) had already been made by the Cabinet," she said.

"The funny part of this story is God works in very mysterious ways," she added.

Dr Seet said the pro-tem committee had earlier asked for the hospice to be located near Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

"When then Health Minister George Yeo asked why, I told him – and I really believe this – that TTSH has the kindest doctors and nurses. But MOH (Ministry of Health) said 'no' and decided that the hospice should be in the west, near the National University Hospital, as the Thomson Road area was already served by Assisi Hospice," she said.

Providentially, after the protest by the polytechnic, the Dover Park Hospice finally got a home near TTSH in 1992.

During the "dark early days" of the Dover Park Hospice, Dr Seet her-

self was going through an equally bad time in her personal life.

"My divorce occurred, and I went through three years of absolute hell and depression, among other things. But these people were all there. They knew and were there. They stood by me," she said.

Indeed, life's hard knocks pushed Dr Seet harder, going back to when she was a child growing up in Malacca.

She had wanted to be a medical doctor, but circumstances did not permit that – the year she was in Form Six, her father lost his job.

Instead, she applied for the Colombo Plan Scholarship in Malaysia and studied biochemistry in Australia, graduating with a first-class honours degree in 1964.

The next year, when she was a research fellow and tutor at the faculty of medicine of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Seet disagreed with the bumiputera policy of Malaysia and the treatment of exam scripts along racial lines.

She broke her bond to stand by her principles.

"My father borrowed from his in-

surance policy. My mother cashed out her Employment Provident Fund, and they bought me out. They knew that the decision was one of conscience and they supported my stand," she said.

Within two weeks of her resignation, Dr Seet secured a job in Singapore – in 1966.

"I remember I didn't dare to tell the Singapore Public Service Commission I was a Colombo Plan scholar, that I was breaking my government bond," she said, laughing.

Dr Seet was hired as a clinical biochemist in the then Government Department of Pathology. While working here, she obtained a doctorate in clinical biochemistry from the then University of Singapore in 1969.

"I never looked back," she said.

Doing community work was nothing new for Dr Seet. "It was part of my DNA," she added.

Prior to going into politics in 1988, she worked with the Association for the Deaf, first as its vice-president and then as its president.

"During this period, things were happening among the deaf. Our kids were passing PSLE, they were passing O levels, they were going to the polytechnics. That was how I was spotted, invited to a tea session (by the ruling People's Action Party) and the next thing, I was asked to stand for elections," she said.

Dr Seet went on to become the first female acting minister, before her election defeat by then Singapore Democratic Party chairman Ling How Doong in 1991.

Although she did not touch on the subject of the loss during this interview, Dr Seet did, two years ago, shed light on the hand-washing controversy of the 1991 election. She told PAP news magazine *Petir* that she had actually washed her hands after shaking the hands of pork sellers in a market, not a fishmonger.

"I washed my hands... simply because I thought that if I shake the hand of another person later who may be Muslim, it would be a religious offence," she had said.

Having put all that behind her, she is now concentrating on bringing hospice awareness to the community at large.