

STARTING YOUNG

Giving philanthropy a reality cheque

Benson Tan and Tabatha Maitland help firms make more informed decisions about charity, reports **TEH SHI NING**

THEY believed that the best way to “do something meaningful” was not to run off to join the Peace Corps but to direct companies to act responsibly and use their money to make a real difference.

Starting their own consultancy to do just that, however, turned out to be more challenging than Benson Tan, 30, and Tabatha Maitland, 28, had imagined.

The original idea was simple. “We always read reports of this company giving a million dollars to charity, that company giving a million dollars to charity. But what happens to that money? The critical moment is the photo-taking and one-time report – that’s that,” says Mr Tan.

So the initial aim of Global Causeways (GC), which the duo co-founded in 2009, was to execute corporate philanthropy projects more leanly and effectively than the non-governmental organisations typically could.

“But then we realised companies here are not ready for that. They were happy to sign cheques, but were very stressed when told that the cheques they were signing were not actually doing any good!” laughs Ms Maitland.

So the part of the business that grew instead was consultancy and training: educating companies on how to exercise authentic corporate social responsibility. After all, a photo of a cheque being handed over may yield shallow publicity value but little more.

CSR has to encompass far more than ad-hoc charity, says Mr Tan, who has been looking up the environmental and human rights records of companies since his early days as an undergraduate and acts on that information as a consumer too.

How a company’s operations impact the environment, how it manages its supply chain, how it engages its employees and how strategic its philanthropy is, all add up to CSR, says Mr Tan. The bulk of GC’s business today then, comes from holding workshops and providing recommendations on how companies can engage employees better in their CSR efforts.

Global Causeways now turns a decent profit and its founders are getting paid – which was not the case for its first two years.

As fresh social science graduates from the Singapore Management University in 2009, when the economy was battered by the global

financial crisis, the opportunity costs of starting a business seemed fairly low. But it was still a weighty decision.

Ms Maitland recalls how, when the banks gave a year’s reprieve on interest for student loan repayments, many of their peers threw as much of their monthly incomes towards paying off the loans as possible. “For Ben and I, it was just, phew, no need to pay these loans for now. It’s frightening as hell when the real world is your problem and not someone else’s,” she says.

The entire venture was funded by their own savings. They had decided against applying for grants as many of those available came with strings attached, such as a seat on the company’s board and a say in its affairs. “We knew we had to find our feet and required more flexibility,” says Mr Tan.

“Also we had a lot of free advice from the SMU faculty and a very supportive environment. The only thing that was missing was the money. And I’ve never believed that’s a reason not to do something,” says Ms Maitland.

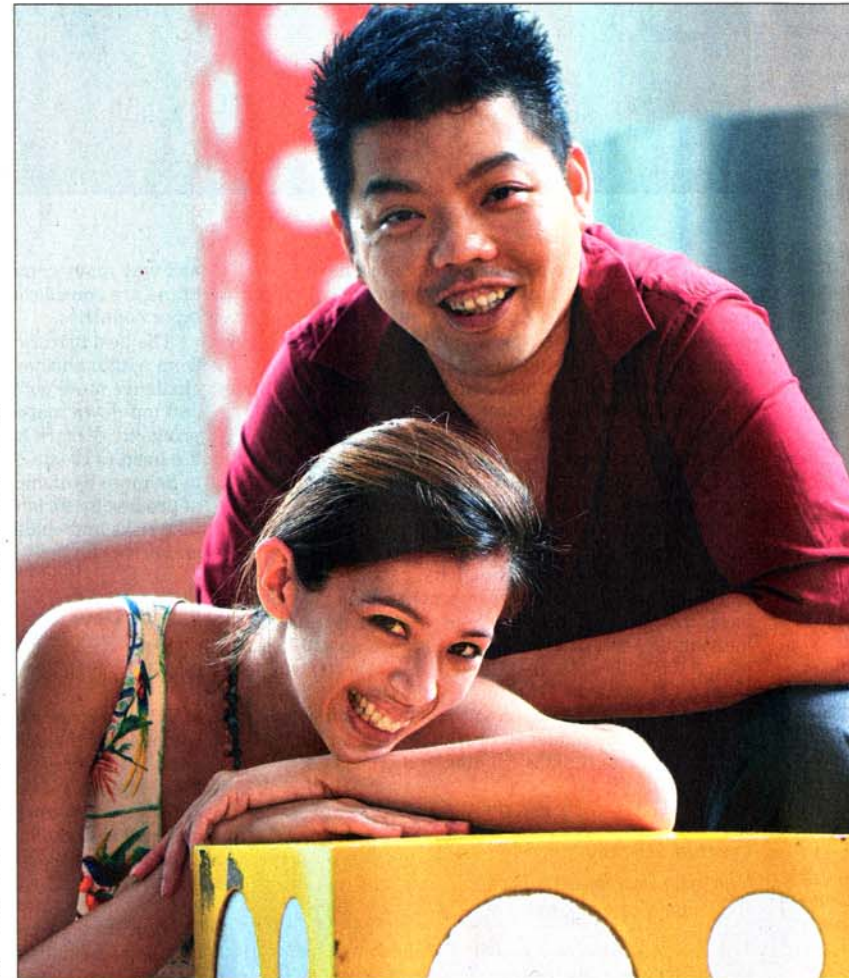
The early days proved tough also because of the nature of the business. “The consultancy business is very unique. It’s about who you are rubbing shoulders with, who you’re playing golf with. It’s the C-suiters who usually bring in the consultants, so coming straight out of school without that network was a huge challenge,” says Ms Maitland.

As a service business, GC’s revenue was also very much constrained by how much the two of them were able to work. “That is finite, no matter how much we may think that it’s possible, we simply cannot work 24/7. You get to a point where you can’t take on more business,” she says.

Discipline was a problem too. Mr Tan says candidly. “I was a very sluggish student. And especially when you run a business out of home, the delineation between work and personal life is not really obvious,” he says.

Remaining optimistic took effort too. “After the 15th ‘no’ for the day, you really ask yourself, do you still want to call the next five numbers?” he says of the many cold calls they had to make when starting out.

What always helps, they say, is a visit to Laos to see the villagers who are benefiting from projects GC has helped its clients to roll out so far.



Hit the ground running: Mr Koh and Ms Maitland started Global Causeways, a consultancy that helps companies make better use of their charity dollars – in 2009 – when the economy was still grappling with the regional financial crisis. PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

After all, it was a backpacking trip to Laos back in 2008 that first set the stage for their current partnership. “The idea was to go through a few countries, but we loved Laos so much that we spent the whole trip there,” says Ms Maitland.

They befriended locals and visited villages off the backpackers’ circuit – villages they have since returned to several times. These connections have since formed a network that they have been able to tap on when suggesting development projects in the region to interested clients.

That first trip also helped shape their respective roles in Global Causeways. “Ben’s takeaway from the trip was: ‘I want to build a school, help these children.’ My takeaway was: ‘They’re so inefficient, and I want to bring more efficient ways of doing things in,’” says Ms Maitland. In the work they do today, Mr Tan takes a more active role in planning and measuring the impact of development interventions on the ground, while Ms Maitland makes sure the project is suited to each client.

eign-based consultancies who are now wanting a piece of the market,” says Mr Tan.

As such, GC also has plans to take its training programmes – especially its employee engagement workshops with themes such as composting at home, and 365 things one can do to reduce one’s carbon footprint – and adapt them for schools. Ms Maitland thinks GC can provide training for students venturing on overseas community involve programmes, such as in intercultural communication, or even assist schools in executing these projects.

The duo have bigger plans. Their firm’s name, after all, hints at global ambitions. They are now building up reserves to find an office space and hire people by the end of this year. Within the next five years, Mr Tan hopes to grow Global Causeways into a team of at least 20 specialist, boutique consultants.

“We meant to go overseas, international. And it’s not unrealistic still. Big businesses still need us, because they don’t speak the language of the region,” says Ms Maitland.

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