

People

S'porean honoured for community work in Wales

She is awarded prestigious MBE for public service in race, religious and women's issues

Toh Wen Li

Singaporean Shereen Williams has worn many hats in her adopted home of Wales since moving there in 2005.

From managing race relations and countering extremism to tackling violence against women and overseeing the resettlement of Syrian refugees, the 35-year-old seems to have done it all – spearheading community projects, sitting on committees and becoming a prominent speaker on these and other issues.

Last month, she was made an honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for her community work in Wales. An MBE is given for outstanding achievement or service to the community.

In an interview with The Straits Times last week, the former Tampines girl said she did little voluntary work in Singapore. It was only after moving to Wales – to be with her civil servant Welsh husband – that her passion for community work began. While hunting for a job, she decided to volunteer in the local community to pass the time.

What started as a means of keeping homesickness at bay in 2005 soon became a full-time occupation. She said: "I realised I actually enjoyed it... I developed a career from what I loved."

The accountancy graduate from Singapore Management University made her first forays into community work as a treasurer for Wales' Ethnic Youth Support Team.

She also joined the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations Wales as development officer, rising to become its youngest director at 24. In 2010, she became the first female Muslim chaplain in a Welsh university.

Six years ago, she started working for the local government, and is now regional community cohesion coordinator for Newport and Monmouthshire (East Gwent), and has also been appointed to two public bodies in Wales.

Mrs Williams, who has yet to collect her medal at an official ceremony, is among a small number of Singaporeans who have been awarded MBEs.

In 2005, trade and investment officer Mindy Tay, then 63, was given the title for her long service at the British High Commission and for promoting trade relations between Britain and Singapore.

Mrs Williams is now a permanent resident in Wales, where she lives with her husband Omar and their two sons – aged three and seven. She also has a 16-year-old step-daughter. Her husband also received an MBE in 2015 for public and voluntary services to community cohesion in Wales.

Mrs Williams said living in a predominantly white community miles apart from cosmopolitan London poses challenges.

In her first week in Wales, a boy in his early teens spat on her. And when she was being filmed for the BBC documentary *New Nation: White, Welsh And Muslim* (2009), a passer-by told her he would shoot her if she had a gun.

She is cautious but remains unshaken. "Why should I give them the power to change how I live my life?"

Mrs Williams now coordinates two panels that manage referrals of people at risk of radicalisation. She believes the best way to tackle extremism and discrimination is to give people opportunities to interact and form genuine friendships.

"When you get to know the others, you are less likely to fear them. You don't have to agree – that's the beautiful thing, you can respect their right to believe what they want to believe," said Mrs Williams, who has founded an inter-faith forum, and co-founded a consortium of Muslim organisations which has held many inter-faith events.

Wales saw a surge in the number of hate crimes against minorities after Britain's shock vote last June to

leave the European Union. This fall, then rose again after the recent attacks in London and Manchester.

Mrs Williams said: "A part of me is worried about what will happen to people like me – who are non-European migrants."

She is proud of her work with the Henna Foundation, which supports Muslim women and children. In 2015, she helped a young woman

get an annulment for a marriage she had been forced into – a common problem in the Muslim community in Wales. A year later, the woman met a man, fell in love and is now happily married.

Tackling problems faced by the community tends to be more challenging, she said, because the Muslims there come from all sorts of cultural backgrounds – hailing from regions as diverse as South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Turkey and Bosnia.

Mrs Williams returns to Singapore for three weeks every year to visit her extended family and friends. She was a "typical Singaporean" when she arrived in Wales, trying – and failing – to find eateries that were open at 11pm, and learning the awkward way that in Britain, "pants" are not trousers but underwear. "We had a meeting about what to get for a charity drive, and I kept talking about pants. People were thinking, she's disgusting, she's talking about second-hand underwear!"

The MBE is a prestigious award, but Mrs Williams is not one to let it get to her head. "It's slightly embarrassing. Friends have been coming to my office and currying, shuffling on the door. We had a bit of a laugh over it."

She added: "The same problems and challenges are still there, no matter how many characters you have after your name."

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Mrs Shereen Williams at Waging Love, a symposium which she hosted with Muslim scholars at the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff in 2015. PHOTO COURTESY OF SHEREEN WILLIAMS