

Young activist makes a splash in tackling water crisis

Law undergrad founded Global Water-crisis Awareness at age 14, funding it with money from her 10 scholarships

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For law undergraduate Venezia Wee, age truly is just a number.

At the age of 14, she founded the Global Water-crisis Awareness (GWA) International Movement within the walls of her own high school classroom in Shanghai. Using the money from her 10 scholarships – totalling about \$15,000 – to fund the movement, she helped raise awareness of the water crisis in 11 cities across five countries.

In the next seven years, she went on to deliver seminars, organise fundraising events, and help finance over nine water projects – which involve the construction of water infrastructure such as wells, handwashing stations and catchment areas – in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Speaking to the passionate young activist, however, it is easy to forget that she is only 20 years old.

Having moved to China as an infant, the Singaporean spent 18 years living in Shanghai. There, she realised the water crisis was not something distant, but taking place in the country she was living in.

"To be frank, when I was young I used water like nobody's business," she said, adding that living in one of China's most urbanised cities had led to her taking water for granted. "I knew that over 1.4 million children die each year from water-borne illnesses. But such alarming facts and figures just sounded so far away as I thought it would never happen to where I was living and studying. About seven years ago, I realised I had been wrong when I

learned from an article that one in every four people lacks access to safe drinking water in China."

GWA initially began as a project within her own high school, where she set up an exhibition of 140 self-designed posters to raise awareness of the water crisis.

With the support of her teachers and peers, she began reaching out to the wider community – first expanding her efforts to other schools in Shanghai, then to cities in China, and eventually to different countries around the world, starting with South Korea and the United States.

Enlisting the help of local contacts such as water organisations and schools in order to organise seminars and fundraising activities, Ms Wee also customises the approach she takes in different countries – an approach she calls "context-driven".

"For example, in San Jose, California, drought has haunted them for years," she said. "And in South Korea, they wanted to find out more about how to combat water crisis on a daily basis."

By engaging different audiences based on their individual situations, it was easier to get people to take action, she added.

However, while her parents were supportive of her efforts, she admits that her youth made it a challenge for her to be taken seriously, especially at the start.

"As a young activist, building credibility was extremely difficult," she said. "Accepting rejections soon became a norm for me."

In order to get people on board, she cold-called potential partners



A Global Water-crisis Awareness (GWA) International Movement seminar at Hua Yi Secondary School. GWA founder Venezia Wee, a Singapore Management University law undergraduate, hopes to spread awareness in Singapore about the water crisis. PHOTO: VENEZIA WEE

EVERY LITTLE STEP COUNTS

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MS VENEZIA WEE

via Skype. She even went down to the Water Municipal Office in Shanghai, where she was living at that time, to talk to experts and gain support.

Reaching out to partners from different countries also came with its own set of challenges. For example, in South Korea, she had to deal with the language barrier, while communities in rural China presented the problem of inaccessibility.

"But as I go along, I realise I'm not fighting a lonely war," she said. She

receives support from her partners and like-minded people, which helps drive her in her journey, she added.

For instance, in 2016, she was named one of 10 inspirational women in law by the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association, for her contributions outside her law studies. The guest of honour, lawyer and Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Indraneel Rajah, referred her to national water agency PUB, which is now one of her partners.

Now a third-year undergraduate at the Singapore Management University, Ms Wee hopes to spread awareness in Singapore as well about the water crisis.

In future, she hopes to work in the areas of dispute resolution and cross-border work.

She also plans to eventually scale back her involvement with GWA after joining the legal workforce full time.

"I'm not sure how long more I'd be running GWA," she said, adding that she is looking for a successor. "But there is one thing I'm sure of, and that's every little step counts, and someone out there will benefit from our actions."

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In 2016, Ms Wee was named one of 10 inspirational women in law, for her contributions outside her law studies at SMU. PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN FOR STRAITS TIMES