

New School of Thought

BELIEVING THAT VALUES ARE THE LIFELINE OF ANY ORGANISATION OR SOCIETY, **BERVYN LEE** IS REDEFINING THE SINGAPOREAN VIEW OF A TRADITIONAL EDUCATION. MELISSA GAIL SING FINDS OUT HOW

THE NEW YEAR IS WHEN MANY OF US look within, question our purpose in life and reassess our values. The more determined might make a pact with themselves to start doing something good or kick a bad habit. One can say this introspection is what Dr Bervyn Lee hopes more tertiary students will engage in on a regular basis, and eventually in a more natural way.

The director of the Office of Student Life at Singapore Management University (SMU) heads a team of 30 staff who are behind SMU LifeLessons. Unveiled in May 2013, this values-based programme uses reflection and dialogue to groom a new breed of graduates grounded with certain values and geared towards more community-inclined decisions and outcomes at the workplace.

Through SMU LifeLessons, Lee hopes to put some structure to the imparting of values to students. During activities such as co-curricular activity training, orientation camps, community service and overseas exchanges, time will be set aside for students to reflect on their goals and priorities, and share their thoughts with facilitators who will comprise staff, coaches, alumni and senior students. The team has already been joining students in training activities and competitions, and even accompanied them overseas for various events. Lee has also developed a journal for reflection, which he hopes to distribute to first-year students this year.

"I tell my students: Do not confuse your academic qualification for an education. What's the point of having the best degree if you don't use it to make the world a better place?" says Lee. "A real education should inspire people not to be the best in the world, but to be the best for the world. There are issues to deal with, whether it's poverty, human trafficking or an ageing society and, as we advance with knowledge or skills, we should use those very things to solve some of these issues.

"It all starts with the realisation that you're not here for yourself; the greater purpose is the people

around you. Keeping that in mind will slowly translate into how you conduct your business in future."

Lee's previous appointments with the Singapore Sports Council and National Institute of Education put him in good stead to lead the SMU LifeLessons initiative. Much of his prior work had to do with the value of sports to the development of people. The senior lieutenant colonel (NS) with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) says, "Through courses I

have attended, whether it's with the SAF Centre for Leadership Development or with some of the staff development initiatives at the Singapore Sports Council, I found that the more one is placed in a position to lead others, the more one asks oneself what it is one really needs to get right. And you can't run away from values."

He also recalls his student days when he was a competitive swimmer and his father, then a school principal, would drag himself out of bed at 4am to send him for training before returning home and getting ready for work. "I will always remember how, in the lift on the way down, Dad would rest his head against the wall in sheer exhaustion. However, he'd do it four times a week anyway, sometimes even on weekends, because he had a deep belief in what I wanted to do. He knew I loved swimming but wasn't too fond of studying, and he committed himself to my goals."

When asked about the most important lesson he has learnt in life, the devoted father of two teenagers pauses for a while in deep thought. "To be one's best for others," comes his response. "And I hesitate to say it, because I ask myself, 'Have I really learnt it?' To learn something is to be able to instinctively apply it on a regular basis. It sounds very moralistic, yet I am the first to say that I've fallen short even in some of the things I say."

But therein lies the lesson: Life is a journey and it's not one where we will succeed all the time, he says. "It's not one where, when we've arrived at where we want to go, we can turn around and say we've found the promised land. But the journey itself is important." ■

