



THE LONG INTERVIEW | THE CHANGE-MAKERS

One size doesn't fit all, but schools continue to educate kids that way. Singaporean mother of five Pamela Lim wants to change that. Despite being diagnosed with all sorts of problems, her children entered university before they were 14. She tells **Susan Long** how she wants to give other kids struggling to fit into mainstream schools another route to get to university.

# Giving bright kids a head start

**S**HE was the toast of the town about a decade ago. Ms Pamela Lim was the founder and chief executive officer of a leading financial software developer in Asia that got approval for a Nasdaq-SGX listing. She bagged many coveted entrepreneurship awards and went on to become CEO of two global companies.

Then, in 2004, she fell off the radar, choosing instead to stay at home to mind her five children after childcare arrangements fell apart. Mothering turned out to be her toughest assignment. In local primary and secondary schools, her children were variously diagnosed with autism, executive function disorder, and existential depression. One was suspended from school for almost two years for misbehaviour.

But she stood by them, cooking, cleaning and homeschooling them. Ms Lim also started forging a new identity, melding her three favourite roles: mother, entrepreneur and educator.

With her help, her three elder children qualified for university by age 14. Her fourth child won a place at one of the world's top varsities at 12. Her youngest, now 10, is taking pre-university courses.

For the past year, the 47-year-old entrepreneurship and innovation senior lecturer at the Singapore Management University (SMU) has been a hit online. Her popular websites, on business education, multiple intelligences and teaching technologies, have some 2,000 subscribers each. Her Facebook page has 8,000 followers.

She is now finishing a book on how she tailored her children's education to their strengths. It will be published next year.

Tomorrow, she will launch the online All Gifted High School here with an American partner accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The latter is a recognised regional accrediting body in the United States.

The school is targeted at families who choose to homeschool



Ms Pamela Lim, who is finishing a book on how she tailored her children's education to their strengths, will launch the online All Gifted High School here tomorrow. It is targeted at families who opt to homeschool their kids, from pre-school level upwards. Priced from \$100 a month, her courses are designed for students to move forward at their own pace. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM



their kids, from pre-school level upwards. It also offers high school courses for those as young as 10 which lead to US diploma accreditation for early entrance to universities worldwide. Most universities take in exceptional students below 18 on a case-by-case basis.

Right now, school education all over the world is one-size-fits-all. "My experience having five kids is that one size doesn't fit all," she says with her usual economy of words. Education, she believes, should be tailored to each student's ability and interests.

Her courses, priced from \$100 a month, are designed for students to move forward at their own pace. This avoids the problems that arise when advanced students disturb others in class when bored, or when slower students feel discouraged when they lag behind, she says.

This is what happened to her children. One was ready for O levels at Primary 3. Another could not read or count at eight. She says she understands that most national education systems are locked into mass models, which do not allow deviations or accelerations. The Ministry of Education allows "grade skipping or subject acceleration" only on a very selective basis. Since 2000, only seven children have skipped a grade level in primary schools.

Good schools here provide university-level courses, but no accreditation. Smart kids, she notes, soon wise up that their effort leads to nought. "Nobody likes being stuck doing the same thing over and over again. The brighter they are, the more repetitions of same material they have to do. Keeping them there kills their interest. They learn not to try."

Her belief is that if students can do higher-level work, even at 14, they should be helped to enter university. "Focus on their gifts rather than deficiencies. If they are good at reading but bad at maths, let them read about maths. Fill them up with what makes them tick. You can patch up deficiencies when you work on strengths and their self-esteem goes up."

Ms Lim decided to offer the courses to provide a "more affordable" alternative for those struggling in mainstream schools. Her own children did online courses

run by private US high schools. These cost US\$12,000 (S\$15,000) to US\$32,000 a year, far too expensive for most families.

She is frank about the fact that she was able to afford it, as a successful entrepreneur who had sold a company. Her husband, Mr Lim Kang Song, 49, is senior vice-president of a software company here.

Her flexible teaching job at SMU also enables her to shuttle between Australia, the US and Singapore to accompany her early entrant kids, who needed chaperoning during their first semester at different universities.

At All Gifted High, she plans to churn out new courses on subjects such as food and programming to seize young and restless imaginations. Over the last two years, the skilled programmer has worked on and patented a system to convert textbooks into e-learning systems at the touch of a button. The system has been licensed to SMU, which has developed it further and will begin test-runs next year.

At SMU, she is known as a relentless innovator who deploys technology to solve problems. Every semester, she dabbles in a new project, often self-financed. In 2006, she offered a Toyota Altis car online to the lowest bidder to study online bidding behaviour as a social experiment.

She also picks at least one hungry student-entrepreneur to mentor each term. So far, she has helped more than 80 students start businesses here and two to prepare for listing.

#### Tutor accelerator

FROM age five, she helped out at her parents' Queens Crescent wet market chicken stall. She used to sprint with 12 freshly slaughtered fowl to the stall up to 20 times a day.

Home was a one-room Queensway flat. At Tanglin Girls' School, however, poor social skills dogged the middle child. Blurting out all the answers, she was walloped by teachers and shunned by classmates for being noisy and "know-it-all".

From 15, she worked as a typist and tuition teacher, putting herself through university when her father became bankrupt. She earned a lucrative reputation for

#### Pamela Lim on...

##### How she's never stopped dabbling in new ventures

"You don't stop being an entrepreneur just because you are pregnant and breastfeeding."

##### Why she's taking education online

"Most children today are digital natives, born to a world of iPads and smartphones, not pen and paper. We have to reach out to them in their medium. Otherwise, we risk losing them."

##### Her solutions for Singapore

"Instead of having more people generating more gross domestic product, can we have fewer people generating more GDP? Why do graduates all have to be in their 20s? If we start to accelerate the able through school and they enter the workforce earlier, that would help fill the labour gap. This would also help Singaporean women, many of whom put off marriage to pursue their education, to have more babies and earlier."

##### Her advice to other mothers here

"First, don't have the herd mentality. Don't chase after things just because everybody else is. Know your children, listen to their hearts, see what they love to do, then guide them to develop their passion. Supporting them is easier than dragging them along."

##### What ails child talent here

"We have a lot of talent in Singapore, be it sports, music or academic. Unfortunately, many kids don't get to pursue anything to their fullest potential. Often, they are dragged left, right, centre in trying to do everything and be a jack of all trades. And then they become disillusioned."

being able to turn F students into A scorers at PSLE. "Even in those days, I accelerated my students, teaching them ahead of their schools whenever they were ready. When some parents found out their kids could do the whole year's work, some dismissed me. Others recommended me to their friends because they liked what I did to their child's self-esteem," says the Raffles Girls' Secondary and Raffles Junior College alumna who studied mathematics and economics at the National University of Singapore.

Upon graduation, she became a Singapore Airlines stewardess but quit as soon as she realised they "promoted by batch rather than merit". She then joined IBM. But

unchallenged by her administrative role, she borrowed its programming books to study at home, and wrote a programme to automate her job. That was followed by four years in programming at Citibank, then a couple of banking software sales jobs, during which she tied the knot and bore three children.

She breastfed all her children during their first year of life, pumping and freezing, amid trips overseas. She would take off after putting them to bed and race home before they awoke, so they never knew she was gone.

In 1998, with only \$10,000 and three employees, she co-founded Ebiz Solutions, a company which supplied e-commerce software to

the financial industry. Within a month, the firm was profitable. Clients included Citibank, GK Goh and Kim Eng Securities in Singapore, property behemoth Sun Hung Kai in Hong Kong, and Softbank in Japan.

By 2001, the company - renamed 3rd Frontier - had grown to 400 employees in seven countries. After giving birth to her fourth child, she sold the company for an undisclosed sum. She then became the regional managing director of business performance management software company Hyperion Solutions, CEO of online payment service provider iQB, a subsidiary of Singapore Technologies, and a mother for the fifth time.

In 2004, on the cusp of her biggest deal ever, she resigned. Her father-in-law, who used to help take care of her children, had died, and her mother-in-law had fallen into depression.

It was a climb-down at first, going from CEO to teaching business in a polytechnic and tending to five kids. "It was a revelation. I had to relearn how to live," she remembers.

The next 10 years saw her tearing her hair out deciphering her daughter's tearful refusal to go to school, as well as imploring school officials to take in her son, who was disruptive in class.

When they refused, she homeschooled him and discovered he was "profoundly gifted" with an IQ in the top 0.001 percentile. She helped him apply to university and accompanied him for one semester, doing the work herself to demonstrate how to participate and pay attention in class.

In business parlance, she assesses her past decade as "a good investment". She put four children into university. Three of them are currently national-level athletes in various countries. Her eldest, now 19, is serving national service here and midway through his digital media master's degree in Boston. He already has two degrees in animation and fine arts and wants to be a cartoonist.

Her second child, a 17-year-old, is graduating soon with a psychology degree from Australia and plans to work in mental health. Her third, aged 15, is reading music and maths in an Australian university and hopes to

open a restaurant.

Her fourth, now 13, a second-year liberal arts undergraduate in the US, is set on becoming a programmer. Her youngest, now 10 and enrolled simultaneously at a primary school in Australia and high school in America, hopes to be a sportsman.

She has few regrets. "These past 10 years, career-wise, have been a wilderness. I don't get to do the things that I'm very good at for a career. But I get to do the things that I love most as a mother," says the Christian who bakes, sews, and cooks every single meal, and has no maid.

Her role model is US First Lady Michelle Obama because "it is much harder to be a good submissive wife who puts husband first than a career woman".

#### Unusual house rules

FORSWEARING tuition, Ms Lim takes an atypical approach to education. Her children, who all scored within the top 10 per cent in the PSLE, are taken out of school supplementary classes that drill students for exams.

"Whatever you can teach in six hours, teach. After that, I want my kids home," she declares. The children make handicrafts to sell on the Internet, write books, do sports and work during holidays.

She resists piling on homework. "No moving targets. If they finish the agreed pages, I don't push them to do just a little bit more. Trust is hard to earn back once it's lost."

Her belief: maximum free time and minimal stress. "When others were swimming 11 times a week, my kids swam three times a week. I don't hothouse or overstretch them. I believe that if you don't push and you keep that passion alive, it will be reignited one day. And they will go further because they are going by themselves, not because you pushed them."

Ultimately, she wants to remake what it means to be a good mother. "A mother's job is not nudging your kids to conform to what the world thinks they should be. It's about helping them find their calling in life and supporting them through their endeavours, whatever it is. Even if it's to be a plumber."

[suelong@sph.com.sg](mailto:suelong@sph.com.sg)