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Headline: Two women, a man and a dream

## Two women, a man and a dream

Man's desire to cycle to every train station in Taiwan sparks duo's quest to help people find their dreams



ore than four years ago, two Singaporean women set off on a holiday hoping to en-joy the scenic beauty Taiwan's east coast: A typhoon alert, however, not

a typnoon alert, nowever, not only derailed their travel plans but also completely changed the lives of Ms Tay Siang Hui, 35, and Ms Valerie Tan, 29. Since beaches were a bad idea

during a typhoon, they took up the suggestion of a train ticketing clerk and headed for Baishatun, a coastal village south-west of Taipei

village south-west of Taipei.
There they met Mr Luo Shilian,
then 64, who ran a restaurant and a
homestay, both converted from old
train carriages. The former station
master said his businesses were a dream come true as he had loved trains all his life.

Ms Tay and Ms Tan, partners in

a film production firm, asked "Papa Luo" if he had other dreams.

He did. He wanted to cycle across Taiwan and take a picture in front of every train station on the island. There were nearly 250.

The two women decided to help

him fulfil his dream.

"He inspired us to think about what our dream was. What if we could share his dream with people around the world?" Ms Tay recalls. They could then meet others who have realised, or are realising their dreams, document and share these experiences and create a chain of

experiences and create a chain or dreams come true.

The pair came back to Singapore, sold off their company and belongings, raised US\$3,000 (\$\$3,700) and turned up with their bicycles on Papa Luo's doorstep six months later. months later.

But their big adventure nearly ended right after it began.
Just four days after setting off with Papa Luo on April 7, 2010, his nonagenarian mother died. He went home, and everything ground to a halt. "We had so many questions.

We had so many questions.

Were we going to stop the project,
where do we go from here? Why
did we do this? Why did we close
every door? Just four days and our

dream is gone?" says Ms Tay.
Perhaps those who thought they had lost the plot were right. Why would two graduates – Ms Tay has a communications degree from Nanyang Technological University, while Ms Tan studied business at Singapore Management University – give up their own media company and a promising future to do something as namby-pamby as col-

The journey with Papa Luo did not resume. Although dispirited, the two women decided to contin-

Today, they have traversed not just Taiwan but also Japan, Hawaii, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica. They are now in the United States collecting and sharing thousands of dreams

Amazingly, they have done it without spending a cent on accommodation, relying instead on the hospitality of those who believe in

what they are doing.

A young Singaporean whose dream was to build his own electric car was so intrigued by their bold-

ness, he lent them money for air-fares each time they needed to fly. "We asked him what he wanted from us. He said, nothing. He wasn't rich but said he travelled a lot and had a lot of miles to claim,

says Ms Tay.

Through couch surfing - an online platform for people to host travellers in their home or be guests at other people's homes – they not only saved money on accommodation but also met a slew of people from a young Caucasian poet and writer in Cao Tun to a Taiwanese man in Taichung who had cycled through the US by himself.

vas also in Taichung that they teacher whose dream was to



Ms Tay Siang Hui, 35, and Ms Valerie Tan, 29, in Costa Rica. They have been relying on the hospitality of those who believe in what they are doing, for accomm

teach English through storytelling, and she persuaded them to give a talk to her pupils. They were so nervous in front of the 100 boisterous children that Ms Tay asked everyone who did not have a dream to raise their hands when she actually

meant the opposite.

"A whole row of girls at the back put up their hands. We didn't know what to say," she recalls. She and Ms Tan carried on, and

later got the children to write their dreams on their palms. When the time came to share what they had written, one eight-year-old girl who did not have a dream stood up.

"Her fist was clenched. Everyone was silent and our hearts went 'Boom Boom' because we didn't know what she was going to say. She opened her palm, and she had written: 'Find my dream'."

had written: 'Find my dream'."
The penny dropped.
The two women realised they had made the mistake of thinking like many educated, privileged folk who had never suffered any upheaval in life. Both had gone to good schools and universities, and enjoyed good careers before forming their production firm Simply Is ing their production firm Simply Is

in 2008.

Ms Tay – the second of three children of a crane operator and a housewife – was a successful producer and documentary film-maker. Her documentary Big Dreams, about the dreams of four child gymnasts in China, won an award at the New York Festivals International TV Bradesting Awards in 2008.

al TV Broadcasting Awards in 2008. Ms Tan's parents own a business selling joss sticks and incense. The older of two children, the aspiring actress worked in a digital creative

actress worked in a digital creative company before setting up shop with Ms Tay.

The three words on the girl's palm jolted the duo. Their role, they decided, was not to help people fulfil their dreams, but to ask: "What's your dream?"

"We had a new motivation and a new reson to continue." recalls

a new reason to continue," recalls

There was no looking back after that. For the last six months, they have been based in Seattle, hosted by the friend of a couch surfer they met in Taiwan. Typically, Ms Tan would sit in front of a computer two weeks before a new destination trying to find hosts who empathise and understand what they do. They would also get in touch with schools, bloggers, film-makers, and cafe and bookstore owners.

cate and bookstore owners.
"We'd tell them we were collecting dreams and would like to work
with them," says Ms Tay.
They gladly take up offers – in
cafes, bookstores and other venues

to talk for an hour before passing

the hat around.

This, and donations from well-wishers who visit their website www.ibelievethatdreamscancome true.com have kept them going for the last three years. Besides photo-graphs and blog entries, the website also contains short videos that they have made on their adven-

The two say they have been very

The two say they have been very lucky. "We've always met good peo-ple," says Ms Tay. She remembers fondly an elder-ly couple in Hawaii – raw vegan chefs – who took them in at a time when Ms Tay was not in the best of health. "There were a lot of things to carry when we were cycling and



It Changed My Life is a new weekly series about lives that have been dramatically changed by events, people or circumstances



"Papa Luo", who runs a restaurant and a homestay both converted from old

I didn't know how to use my body properly then. I had internal bleeding. They took us in for three months and nursed me back to health." she says, adding that the couple gamely acted in a short video for them.

In Mexico, a young cyclist host-

In Mexico, a young cyclist host-ed them for two months, and spent his time and money taking them to media interviews and acting as a translator. He asked for nothing in return. Ms Tan says: "He goes out to paint bicycle paths on the roads at night to make it safe for cyclists. When the authorities paint over them, he would do it again. He wanted to make his a better city. He didn't just share his dream with us, he shared his life."

Their only brush with an unsa-Their only brush with an unsa-voury character also took place in Mexico where they met a govern-ment official at a talk. "Because we were so Singaporean, we reckoned that a government official must mean a good person," says Ms Tay. That night, the man turned up, drunk, at their hostel and banged on the door demanding to be let in. Since arriving in the US earlier

Since arriving in the US earlier this year, they have decided on a different form of outreach. They al-so want to make their project more sustainable. They have managed to snag quite a few paid speaking engagements, including one organ-ised by the University of Washing-ton earlier last week which was open to not just the student body but also the community. "Word got out there that we are two Singaporean girls with an inter-

two Singaporean girls with an inter-esting story to tell," says Ms Tan,

esting story to tell," says Ms Tan, adding that they do at least two talks every month.

A production company in Los Angeles also signed them on to produce a series of short videos called Dreams Unlimited. Their pilot is a video explaining the Chinese character for "mong" (dream), and the second a story about their journey. The videos can be viewed at

The videos can be viewed at http://goo.gl/pLaR7f.
Meanwhile, Ms Tay and Ms Tan have set their hearts on reaching out to communities. For the last few months, they have been work-ing on a community project in Bell-ingham in Washington. It is an art installation in a community book-store called Village Books.

store called Village Books.

"We are asking the whole community to share their dreams by contributing photos and we will use their photos for a mural which will stay in the bookstore for a whole year," says Ms Tan.

Ms Tay chimes in: "Someone said something very interesting to us not long ago. 'What is more powerful than one person living his wildest dreams? It's a community coming together to live their

coming together to live their dreams and in doing so, inspire oth-ers to do the same." The two - who want to make a

documentary of their journey - say they will always have fond memo-ries of Papa Luo, the man who in-spired them to live their dreams. Though they have not reconnected since, they keep tabs on news about

"We know he is well because we still read articles about him now

and then," says Ms Tay.
They, in turn, have inspired others to seize their dreams.
Mr Lawrence Koh, 28, was so

awed by what they did, he quit his teaching job to become a full-time sand artist and performer. "I've seen how far they've gone.

When you want to realise a dream you need to bash through all the challenges and let go of things which stop you from being true to yourself," he says.

The two women are not sure when they will stop although they have told family and friends they will be chasing dreams for five years.

years.
"We see value in the project and "We see value in the project and the message we are trying to share. We have grown up so much, and now know so much more about ourselves. We hope to keep this going," says Ms Tay. After all, she adds, dreams remind us of what we stand for.

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Ms Tay and Ms Tan gave a talk to pupils in Taichung and got them to write their dreams on their palms. One girl wrote, "Find my dream". That joited the duo to change their role to asking people, "What is your dream?"

## Miraculous moment

When someone shares a dream with you, it's always a miraculous moment. You know they have made a difference for themselves, just by answering the question: 'What is your dream?" MS VALERIE TAN

## elf-discovery

This journey has torn me apart and put me together again. In the past, took on many things because of my upbringing, education and the expectations of others. Because of that, I told myself there were many things I could not do. This journey's greatest gift is understanding and knowing myself so much better. I know what I can do, what I can create." MS TAY SIANG HUI



y have received several speaking h as one at TEDx in Seattle, US, in May.