

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



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More than four years ago, two Singaporean women set off on a holiday hoping to enjoy the scenic beauty of Taiwan's east coast.

A typhoon alert, however, 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.

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 dreams come true.

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

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

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 boldness, he lent them money for airfares 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.

It was also in Taichung that they met a 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 accommodation and help.

PHOTOS: TAY SIANG HUI

IT CHANGED MY LIFE

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

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 hosted 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 unsavoury character also took place in Mexico where they met a government 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 this year, they have decided on a different form of outreach. They also want to make their project more sustainable. They have managed to snag quite a few paid speaking en-

gagements, including one organised by the University of Washington 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 interesting 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 "dream" (dream), and the second a story about their journey. The videos can be viewed at <http://goo.gl/pLaR7L>.

Meanwhile, Ms Tay and Ms Tan have set their hearts on reaching out to communities. For the last few months, they have been working on a community project in Bellingham in Washington. It is an art installation in a community bookstore 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 dreams and in doing so, inspire others to do the same.'"

The two - who want to make a documentary of their journey - say they will always have fond memories of Papa Luo, the man who inspired them to live their dreams. Though they have not reconnected since, they keep tabs on news about him.

"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.

"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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"Papa Luo", who runs a restaurant and a homestay both converted from old train carriages, inspired the two women to embark on their journey.



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 jolted 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

Self-discovery

"This journey has torn me apart and put me together again. In the past, I 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



Ms Tan and Ms Tay have received several speaking engagements, such as one at TEDx in Seattle, US, in May.