

Saving the earth while helping needy women

Many young people today are taking the career path less travelled and finding jobs that are outside their fields of study or unrelated to their work experience.

The Straits Times speaks to several of these intrepid explorers in the third instalment of a four-part series.

Sue-Ann Tan

When former human resources executive Vanessa Paranjothy was at university, she never thought she would be changing the lives of underprivileged women.

She read a degree in social science at Singapore Management University and spent her undergraduate years playing football and hanging out with her friends, like any other student.

When Ms Paranjothy, 29, graduated, she worked in human resources for about a year and a half before diverging from the conventional route of her peers.

In 2015, she and her two sisters co-founded social start-up Freedom Cups, which aims to distribute menstrual cups to underprivileged women who do not have access to proper sanitation.

She made last year's Forbes 30 Under-30 Asia list, which recognises 30 outstanding individuals in various fields from social entrepreneurship to sports.

In April, she won the Commonwealth Youth Award for Asia, which recognises young people from the Commonwealth whose innovative projects have had a significant impact on their communities.

This is surprising considering that as a child, she did not really have ambitions or set out to change the world in the way her start-up has done. "I was never too ambitious growing up. I was more focused on having a good time. I played a lot of football and was into athletics growing up," she says.

However, she also credits her upbringing for allowing her to have the capacity to switch to the road less travelled, by not just creating a

TRUSTING HER VISION

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MS VANESSA PARANJOTHY, Freedom Cups' co-founder, on making the switch from a stable job to co-founding a start-up.



Ms Vanessa Paranjothy made last year's Forbes 30 Under-30 Asia list, which recognises 30 outstanding people in various fields. Her advice to those who might want to take the unconventional path: Just do it. PHOTO: COURTESY OF VANESSA PARANJOTHY

social start-up but one that deals with a traditionally taboo topic.

"Thankfully, my parents gave us enough space and support to develop whatever piqued our interest.

"This gave me time to pursue the things I was good at and work at the things I was not naturally good at, eventually allowing me to find 'work' that sets my soul on fire in the form of Freedom Cups."

The taboo surrounding menstruation was the biggest challenge for her rather than the switch from a stable, full-time job to being the co-founder of a start-up at a young age.

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ing brave enough to trust the vision, and then brave enough to trust my legs to be able to make the leap and my hands to mould the vision into life," she says.

But she adds: "The biggest challenge we face at Freedom Cups is the shame, silence and ignorance that surround the issue of periods."

Another challenge was dealing with those who did not approve of her venture: "There definitely were naysayers but I am a believer in listening only to the good stuff.

"I am lucky that as crazy as starting a reusable menstrual product company had sounded, there was nothing but love and support from

the people who mattered."

The start-up sells menstrual cups on a "buy one, give one" model, where every purchase by a woman who can afford it allows her to give a similar cup to a woman from an underprivileged community.

"One can help the earth, their wallets and their bodies by decreasing their single-use waste when it comes to their periods. By getting a Freedom Cup, they can also help give another woman the gift of sanitary periods," she says.

The bell-shaped cups work like a tampon, where they fit under the cervix and collect menstrual blood for up to 12 hours. Unlike tampons

Unconventional path

Ms Vanessa Paranjothy, 29, a social science graduate who worked in human resources, is the co-founder of a start-up that helps underprivileged women. Her journey:

- **2012:** Graduated from Singapore Management University with a bachelor's degree in social science
- **2012 to 2014:** Worked in human resources at a recruitment firm
- **2015:** Founded menstrual product company Freedom Cups
- **2018:** Obama Foundation Scholars Programme at Columbia University

and pads, the cups can be washed and cleaned for reuse.

Ms Paranjothy says she was inspired to take on this work because of the issues women face when having their periods. She adds that 70 per cent of women across the globe do not have sanitary conditions when they are having their periods.

"They do not have access to toilets, running water, pads or tampons. The remaining 30 per cent of women who do have access to pads and tampons face discomfort, leaks, stains, limited mobility and high expenses, while creating a heap of non-biodegradable waste."

A menstrual cup costs \$33. The enterprise has conducted 15 projects in seven countries – Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, the Philippines, India, Nepal and Nigeria – reaching out to more than 3,000 underprivileged women.

These women include sex workers, indebted labourers, nomadic hill tribeswomen, nuns, displaced women, victims of domestic abuse and poor villagers.

On top of this number, the start-up has reached out to and educated more than 5,000 women in South-east Asia, predominantly in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines.

But Ms Paranjothy is not resting on her laurels now that her start-up is making waves. She is currently at Columbia University on the Obama Foundation Scholars Programme, which brings together people who have demonstrated their commitment to finding solutions to challenges in their communities.

She has this advice for others who might want to take the path that diverges from convention: Just do it.

"Aim to leave your little corner of the world in a better state than when you entered it, and then go out and do something to make it happen. I find that hard work behind good intentions is what has made magic happen for us."

suetan@sph.com.sg