

# MOBILISING COMMUNITIES TO ACTION

by Genevieve Cua

Jia Foundation seeks to serve as a catalyst to mobilise support for issues and causes for which funding may be a challenge

As a child, Rebekah Lim recalls that her father, private equity investor Andy Lim, remarked in amusement that she had a "bleeding heart" for causes and injustice. "When I was around eight or nine, he asked me – what do you want to do when you grow up? I think I said something very idealistic – I want to teach the world!" she laughs. "I think everyone can change the world. We're all on this path to discover what this really means for us."

Ms Lim runs her family's Jia Foundation, which seeks to catalyse support for causes for which funding may be a challenge for a number of reasons including a dearth in perceived urgency. The foundation supports issues around the elderly and mental health where the public profile may be less visible, but whose needs are no less real.

Ms Lim's father is chairman and founder of Tembusu Partners. Her mother Lim Hwee Hua served in Parliament between 1996 and 2011 and is currently co-chairman of Tembusu Partners.

The foundation's preference is to help mobilise communities to action to enhance and deepen impact, rather than simply make grants. "As a family, we discussed whether we should even use the word 'foundation' because we didn't want to give the impression that we have lots of money to give. We'd really rather be catalytic in nature and build a network, and harness the network to do more good."

"Jia means family and home. We want whom-ever we work with to feel like this is a working relationship, and not that we are the benefactor or in any way higher, but instead, how can we work together to help support needs?"

Jia Foundation's chosen media through which it hopes to generate awareness, buzz and spark action are less traditional than avenues typically chosen by philanthropists. Its avenues thus far have been via support for the arts, music and film, which may well resonate with a broader audience, particularly the young.

It helps too that the documentaries Jia Foundation has supported have garnered critical acclaim. One of the films Evelyn is a deeply personal film from the Academy Award winning filmmakers of Virunga, among others. A second film Unteachable follows a Singapore teacher as she tries out a novel teaching method from Mexico in the normal-technical stream classes here.

Says Ms Lim: "There are many causes that different family members feel for. My brother is a musician and he has seen how the power of music can change lives. I love film and documentaries. I also really believe that documentaries when launched with an impact strategy have the ability to go really far."

Issues around the elderly strike a chord, thanks to what she describes as a close-knit family. "We're very fortunate that my grandfather lives with us. He's 93 this year and we feel we need to look after the seniors who built the country. But more importantly, seniors are vulnerable to many issues such as social isolation and loneliness. And they're not the sexiest group to support."

"I've heard organisations talk about ROI (return on investment) – like why not support kids instead because there is a longer runway ... But I think (our motivation) also comes from the fact that our family is very close. It's a reflection of how we want to treat our parents and how we want to be treated when we grow older. Older people are just older versions of all of us."

HER interest in film was sparked when she was in the UK in 2012, pursuing a master's degree. She stumbled on a group, called BritDoc, which has been renamed Doc Society. The group produced an award winning documentary Ping Pong, an engaging 2012 film which followed eight octogenarians as they trained and competed in an over-80s table tennis world competition in Inner Mongolia. To enhance the impact of its active ageing message, DocSociety put together a free Ping Pong Care Pack for communities which included a Ping Pong DVD, a rollnet, bats and balls.

In 2014, Doc Society put out Virunga, an expose about a group of park rangers fighting to protect the world's last mountain gorillas in the Virunga National Park located in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Virunga director, Orlando von Einsiedel, subsequently directed and starred in Evelyn, a documentary revolving around the ripple effects of the suicide of his brother Evelyn.

"I was in the UK around three years ago for the film premiere of Evelyn, and I spoke to the director that in Singapore, suicide is a bit taboo to talk about. Maybe we can do a screening in Singapore just to get a conversation going. It started off like that and they asked for some funds to support the impact strategy, and we agreed."



PHOTO: SPH MAGAZINES

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Rebekah Lim, director of Jia Foundation

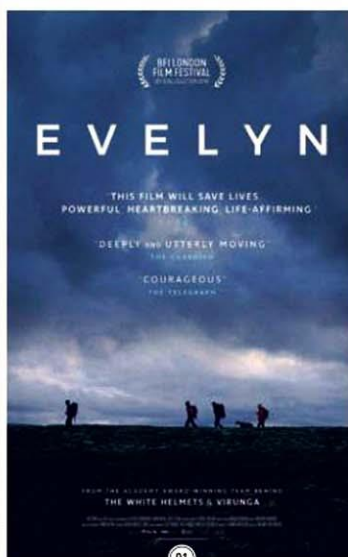


PHOTO: FACEBOOK



PHOTOS: MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



## ART OF COMMUNICATION

1) Evelyn is a deeply personal film from the Academy Award winning filmmakers of Virunga, among others  
2, 3) The film Unteachable follows a Singapore teacher as she tries out a novel teaching method from Mexico.

"Many of the most pressing societal issues are hard to define, involve multiple stakeholders, and have no clear answer. Business families play a crucial role as mobilisers to solve society's problems – they are 'glocalised', guided by legacy, and share a strong obligation to be stewards for future generations. While financial and technical resources are necessary to create impact, trusted communities and networks are also required to collaborate, coordinate, and co-create impactful solutions."

Dr Kenneth Goh, Assistant Professor of Strategic Management (Education),  
BFI@SMU Academic Director

This column profiles business families and how they approach issues of governance and stewardship. They support the Business Families Institute's mission. SMU established BFI in 2012, in response to the growing needs of business families in Asia. It encourages business families to Think Generations, Think Growth, Think Giving and Think Global.

A satellite screening of Evelyn, co-organised with the Singapore Mental Health Film Festival (SMHFF), was held here in 2019 for an audience of around 80, and she consulted with the Samaritans of Singapore on ways to enhance impact. "I think people generally don't feel safe talking about suicide. It's still very taboo and it opens up a part of yourself that's very difficult. We formed a youth committee with the SOS to reach out to groups that may not get mental health support such as MMA (mixed martial arts) fighters, F&B bartenders, youth pastors and even civil servants and workers at start-ups."

"We thought about how to use social media as a tool to reach out, and to host short training sessions on suicide prevention."

Ms Lim is currently on the SMHFF board and is keenly aware that she hails from a background of privilege. Yet she is self-effacing. "I was never very good academically, never did really well in school," she says. She obtained a business degree from NTU in 2008, but didn't know what she wanted to do after graduation. She had stints working for the family business, and with the magazine division of SPH. It was when she was a journalist that she came across an offer for a press junket by World Vision, which sought press coverage for singer A-mei, who remains a World Vision ambassador and who was then travelling to India for the group's 30-hour Famine campaign. The campaign addresses hunger.

At that time she had just resigned from SPH, and was not allowed to go on the trip. She got in touch with World Vision and offered to pay her own way, but this was also turned down, as the media slate was full. As it turned out, the outbreak of the H1N1 virus in Asia in 2009 put the brakes on overseas media coverage. World Vision then rang her to ask if she was still keen. That trip turned out to be pivotal.

"It was at that trip that I felt I wanted to dedicate the rest of my working career to doing good. I was still quite young. I knew it wasn't an immediate decision. I'd have to go through a trial-and-error process to figure things out. Now I try to make sure everything I do has some sort of impact. It's important."

She counts Melissa Kwee of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre as a mentor, as well as philanthropist Mary Ann Tsao of the Tsao Foundation. The Tsao Foundation is a leader in helping to spearhead initiatives and the national conversation on longevity and ageing.

Dr Tsao suggested that she pursue a master's degree in gerontology, which she obtained from King's College, UK in 2019. "She is very open to new ideas and talking to different groups, to see how we can improve the sector as a whole. Both of them (with Ms Kwee) are so wise and so smart. I always find it's very humbling to speak with them."