

# FOR THE LOVE OF FOOD

by Genevieve Cua

The Ngs have built a network of companies to serve the F&B industry, focusing in particular on smaller enterprises and hawkers

AS A child, entrepreneur Nichol Ng was a self-described “busybody”, inquisitive and irrepressible. She credits her grandmother with imbuing her with an ethos that today underpins the businesses and charity that she and younger sibling Nicholas Ng helm.

“At eight, my grandmother had to get a job to feed her two siblings, but she never gave any grief to the world. She was always very positive. When I was eight or nine, because I was a busybody all the time, doing rubbish outside of books, she validated my personality. She said – it’s a blessing for you to be able to give a lot more than to take. I personally have carried that with me throughout my life.”

Today the Ngs have built a network of companies to serve the food & beverage industry, focusing in particular on smaller enterprises and hawkers, to give them a leg up in an extremely competitive market.

Their proposition, via the X-Inc group and XPACE, is to create an ecosystem to enable F&B businesses not just to tap a range of services for economies of scale but also to foster a community and synergies that may bear fruits worth more than the sum of their parts.

Through it all, the siblings also manage The Food Bank Singapore (FBSG), a charity whose outreach has grown tremendously in Singapore. Despite the ongoing pandemic, there are plans to regionalise The Food Bank.

The X-Inc group comprises FoodXervices and GroXers which are in food distribution segments. There is also LogiXtics which offers logistics services, and XPACE which offers a comprehensive co-work and co-creation space for companies. It is, as Ms Ng says, “a little bit like WeWork” – and then some.

“We’ve been in the business long enough and we see a lot of gaps in the F&B ecosystem. Many players face a lot of pain points and there is no support system to enable them to be more successful. We thought how cool it would be if our building embodied the philosophy of collaboration with co-sharing kitchen spaces and co-working spaces for people from different walks of life in the food system.”

“We thought that if we could provide solutions in our building such as office space, kitchen space, warehousing and storage, and importantly the spirit of collaboration, there may be interesting partnerships that can come up... Can we create something of a mentorship to pass down learnt experiences or pitfalls? There are not many successful global brands that have come up from Singapore. Perhaps this ecosystem can at some point build some national brands to fly the flag.”

THIS all takes place at 218 Pandan Loop, a six-storey building called XPACE comprising 250,000 sq feet of space. The building is located in the food zone which is approved for food manufacturing.

Ms Ng says the group hopes to reach “downstream” F&B players whose businesses may be in operation for five or even 15 years. They may be businesses “struggling to migrate” to a bigger scale, or “hawkers who find there is no room for them to experiment”. The services go beyond pure logistics or ghost kitchens. “Ghost kitchens sublet the space from someone, carve out a kitchen and get rental. That’s not our model; they don’t seek to make other people’s businesses more creative or successful.”

The building was to have been officially opened in June 2020 but Covid-19 put paid to the plans. Still, without much marketing, enquiries have come in from parties who are looking for an accredited manufacturing facility and those who seek value-added services such as help in developing alternative meat products, for instance. Garrett Popcorn counts among the tenants.

The siblings plan to take its co-working and collaboration concept overseas – to Vietnam for a start. But Covid-19 travel restrictions and a renewed surge in infections in Asia have put things on the backburner for now. “We’re still planning to go to Vietnam or South-east Asia,” says the younger sibling, Mr Ng.

The brother-sister duo hail from an entrepreneurial family whose fortunes ebbed in the wake of the Asian crisis in 1997. At its



PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

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Nichol Ng (left), co-founder of The Food Bank Singapore, with her brother Nicholas Ng



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peak, the family business spanned trading operations – as many as 40 companies in 25 countries – and generated an annual turnover of S\$250 million. But this collapsed and the sibling’s father was made a bankrupt.

Ms Ng says: “We actually see our bankruptcy experience as a pocket of gold, so to speak, because it is a stark reminder that we can’t take anything for granted. One of the biggest lessons we learned from our late father is that when money comes in very fast, it also goes very fast. He built an empire in a short span of 15 years, without much help as well, but there was over-expansion. That has kept us on our toes.”

AT that time, the siblings were still in school. The one surviving business was a traditional food distribution operation set up by their grandfather. Ms Ng made an offer to buy over the business in 2007; Mr Ng joined in 2008 and they set their minds to transform and reposition the business, and FoodXervices was born. Today, the group has an estimated turnover of around S\$80 million.

Says Mr Ng: “It was very tough. Our dad and an uncle were still in the business. By default, the staff looked to the older generation for guidance. But we buckled down, we worked hard and proved to

the older generation that we knew what we were talking about.”

In the charity space, the siblings set up FBSG in early 2012. It attained charity status later that year, and became an Institute of Public Character in 2015. Its mission is to end food insecurity in Singapore, setting it-

## LET’S DIG IN

1, 2, 3) The onset of Covid-19 and subsequent circuit breaker further fuelled FBSG’s outreach. In 2020, it redistributed 1,000 to 1,600 tonnes of food.

“Familial and commercial concerns are often intertwined in family-owned enterprises. Successful family enterprise owners have cultivated skills, mindset, and structures so that these concerns become mutually reinforcing. Many family enterprises possess the DNA to create long-term sustainable impact, enabling the enterprises to be profit generating while also serving the community. Through thought leadership and education, BFI aims to catalyse meaningful societal impact through the family enterprise.”

Dr Kenneth Goh, Interim Academic Director, Business Families Institute; Assistant Professor of Strategic Management (Education), V3 Group Fellow in Family Entrepreneurship, Singapore Management University

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.

self a target to achieve this by 2025.

Despite ranking among the most food-secure nations in the world, two out of five Singapore households experience food insecurity at least once in the past 12 months. This was based on a 2019 study by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, in collaboration with FBSG, published last year. Affected families were likely living in one and two-room HDB flats. Said Mr Ng: “We really wanted to give back and we saw there was food wastage, even of canned food. We believe food shouldn’t be dumped... Everybody has to eat.”

THE onset of Covid-19 and subsequent circuit breaker further fuelled FBSG’s outreach. In 2012, it redistributed two tonnes of food. By end-2020, this volume had ballooned to between 1,000 and 1,600 tonnes. The number of charities served has also expanded from around 40 to 370. “It’s a crazy number and it’s all in Singapore,” says Mr Ng.

The pandemic has accentuated food insecurity. During the circuit breaker FBSG stepped in to deliver food to dormitories and families in need as family service centres were considered non-essential.

“We did a lot of dormitories last year. And family service centres contacted us. We never used to do door-to-door delivery but we decided to do dinner, for example. We distributed 5,000 meals a day in the first week, and by the second week we did 13,000 meals a day. DBS gave us their chauffeurs and Mercedes Benzes. Pilots wanted to help and we also had our volunteers,” he says. Between April and September last year, FBSG distributed an estimated one million meals.

FBSG also sought to help hawkers. “We worked with Temasek Foundation to help hawkers who were suffering. So we bought and collected food from hawkers and redistributed that.”

The siblings are now exploring an expansion of The Food Bank concept regionally. Mr Ng says: “We have just established The Food Bank Asia Ltd. This has been in the making for two years. It’s easy for us to feed anybody in Singapore because of our small geographical size. But the region needs a lot of help in professionalising and corporatising how food aid is redistributed. And we can also redirect some excess donations from Singapore.”

The Philippines is the first destination. “We need to redirect food to the right locations because people are dying of starvation. For now the entity will redirect donations first. But we also want to share the knowledge we’ve gathered over the past nine years on how to set up proper food banks.”