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**Date: 11 May 2022**

**Headline: Charmain Kwee: Behind the wheel of her family legacy**

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An emotional and introspective night prompted CHARMAIN KWEE to quit a budding law career for a world that belongs to her father. The affable executive director of Eurokars Group opens up to Crystal Lee about stepping into his shoes.

Each of us inhabits multiple roles in our lives. We are offspring, siblings, parents, partners, friends, employees, mentors and bosses. We are our beliefs, values and history.

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Charmain Kwee is first and foremost a daughter. The younger child of Eurokars Group's executive chairman and founder Karsono Kwee has been cognizant of her father's eminence from an early age – and it is through this lens that she approaches life.

In January last year, 26-year-old Charmain was appointed executive director of the company her father founded in 1985. The largest privately held, multi-brand automotive dealership group in Singapore, Eurokars distributes luxury and premium brands the likes of Porsche,

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Rolls-Royce, McLaren, MG, Mini, Mazda and Pagani locally, as well as in Indonesia, China and Australia. Last May, BMW was inducted into the company's portfolio, and Charmain had a big part to play in this development.

There was a certain synchronicity in her involvement, too. Just as Porsche inspired the elder Kwee to establish Eurokars decades ago, the German carmaker was the reason Charmain went into the family business. "Porsche was a brand close to his heart," she says of her father's deep love for the marque. "Ever since he saw a green Porsche Targa on the road, he wanted to own or sell the car. When he got Porsche, he was integral in growing the brand. He pioneered the Porsche Club Singapore. When the joint venture between Porsche and Eurokars first came up, I could tell he was stressed out by it, concerned about how things would change."

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#### **TAKING THE LEAP**

At that time, Charmain was a legal associate, handling criminal, family and community cases. “I was coming home at about 2, 3am because of work, and I would see my dad unhappy. It made me feel terrible. I thought, he raised me with Eurokars’ earnings, but I was out there slogging, going through blood, sweat and tears, for someone else. While I was

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happy with what I was doing, helping families and doing pro bono work, there was a dissonance, because I was sad that I wasn't supporting my dad."

So, towards the end of 2021, Charmain got cracking, "temporarily," she says, with the Porsche joint venture in the agreements and legal matters. "We also realised we had to get new business in. And since our ties with BMW had always been there, we thought it's an opportune moment to pitch for the brand. Being involved in the pitch, I found myself being part of something. And once you delivered objectives and goals to the brand principals, it didn't feel right to leave and return to my old job. Moreover, as I became more exposed to the car industry, my love for it grew – and I decided to stay."

Although it was a complete change in scenery with a steep learning curve, the new role was fitting for the former lawyer, who claims she "can't really sit and do nothing". Right from the get-go, Charmain had her work cut out for her. Once BMW was aboard, the race was on to open a temporary showroom at 11 Leng Kee Road, which was unveiled less than five months after the dealership was announced. It was also around the time of BMW's participation that Porsche and Eurokars finalised the terms in their joint venture, and under the new scheme, there will also be a new Porsche retail concept opening at Guoco Midtown in the second half of 2023.

As the person who spearheaded the BMW partnership, Charmain's main focus is on the new business, with an overview of the other brands under Eurokars. "I see myself as a general worker, doing everything and anything needed," explains the hands-on executive director. "With BMW, I get to see how a dealership is built from scratch, so it's a good learning ground for me. This means reviewing processes all the way from sales and after-sales to finance, digitisation and manpower. I look at how they can be better and more in line with the current trends, such as cryptocurrency and NFTs."

On the horizon, there will be a full- fledged BMW Service Centre and the brand's RetailNext design concept, with the latter slated to launch next year at the Eurokars' future headquarters located at 11 Kung Chong Road.

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## **FINDING INDEPENDENCE**

There was a time when Charmain, aware of her father's success and influence, tried to step out of her father's shadow. "I got a lot of special treatment when I was younger, from people who knew my dad," she recalls. "When I was a child, I was proud of it. As I got older, from

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when I was 13 or 14 all the way to the early part of university, I started becoming doubtful of people's intentions, always wondering if they are my friends because they like me or they want something from me. That's why I shun from being associated with my dad as a businessman, and never considered taking a business degree."

Growing up, Charmain wanted to be part of the police force, to "catch the bad guys", she says candidly. "But along the way, I realised my fitness isn't great. How am I going to chase down a robber? So I set my mind on criminal law. It was idealistic, but I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. I wanted to help criminals get a fair sentence, because, sometimes, they may have been forced to commit crimes because of personal circumstances. Also, when I was in lower secondary, I saw a few of my friends get into fights with their family members and their parents going through a divorce. I wanted to help families, especially the wives and kids, navigate the process."

Throughout her time in Singapore Management University's Yong Pung How School of Law, Charmain kept her family background a secret. "When it came to applying for training contracts (a formal arrangement for law graduates to obtain working experience prior to being called to the bar), I avoided the big firms. I went back to working with my first boss and mentor from my first internship. I just liked working with him; he is strict and has a good heart."

She continues, "Towards the end of my training contract, there was a case the team took on that I had a conflict with, because one of the names that showed up in a background check was one of my dad's subsidiaries. So I couldn't be involved. I came clean to my boss and he responded saying, 'Oh, so it's true.' Apparently, everyone in the team knew who my dad was, but he said he never believed them. It showed me that he took me in based on my merits, that he treated me as he would treat any other trainee. I was touched by that. That was what made me realise that I could be my own person."

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Two years as a lawyer gave Charmain the confidence, tact and resilience she needed to thrive in Eurokars. Knowing that she was treated fairly gave her more faith in herself. “I also learnt that when you are well- prepared, you’ll feel more confident to make your case, raise your concerns, say no and voice out when something’s not right. That’s why I’m here trying to figure out everything, all the fundamentals, because I cannot speak for or against something if I don’t know what’s going on. And as in any corporation, a new leadership often brings about change, which some people are naturally resistant to. To find ways around that struggle takes resilience as well,” she adds.

#### IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

Since joining his company, Charmain has deepened her understanding of her father. “I knew he was good to his employees, but didn’t realise the extent of his generosity until I started working here. He has covered hospital bills for his staff in his own personal capacity. The pantry auntie, who is a contracted personnel not under Eurokars, had quite a bad fall recently and he also paid for her medical bills. To everyone else who doesn’t know him, he’s like this famous magnate. But in essence, he just wants to protect and take care of the people he loves, which include his employees.”



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It seems to me that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Perhaps unbeknown to Charmain, she has built on Karsono Kwee's legacy even before assuming responsibility at Eurokars. As she recounts a difficult case of divorce due to abuse – how she helped care for the children during stressful mediations, and how she remained in contact with the family to this day, it is

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clear that she, like her father, has gone above and beyond to support others in times of difficulties.

Now that she's embarking on the path that the elder Kwee charted, more similarities between father and daughter have emerged. Beyond a shared love for cars, the pair are "exactly the same" in the way they operate professionally, according to Eurokars executives as well as Charmain's mother. "But I'm not so sure about that," she lets on.

What she can be certain of is this: "Our vision for the company is ultimately the same in that we want it to grow and become bigger. We want to be known as the leading luxury car distributors providing luxury experiences for customers. That is something that I want to carry on in his legacy."

This story first appeared in the May 2023 issue of Prestige Singapore



Crystal Lee

Managing Editor

Prestige Singapore's Managing Editor wonders if she's better with words or numbers. Some days she thinks she's terrible at both. But most of the time, she's pretty good at eating, drinking, admiring beautiful things, and exploring new worlds.