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## Bridging Two Worlds Through Conversation

For Singaporean and recent Singapore Management University (SMU) graduate Daryl Tay, going into humanitarian work was not something he had in mind until a year before graduation. He had charted a career plan in wealth management and dreamed of becoming a consultant in this field before an encounter with a marginalised hill tribe community in Northern Thailand made him rethink his plan. Daryl speaks to us about how he came to the decision of pursuing a rather unconventional career path.

### **Have you always thought of going into the non-profit sector after graduation?**

No, my original plan was a wealth management track with OCBC Bank. I remember drafting a career plan that would see me move into a wealth management role at one of the top five largest wealth management companies.

Two years ago, this plan got turned upside down when I witnessed first-hand the needs of a marginalised hill-tribal community, called the Hmong people, living in Northern Thailand.

### **How did you come to know of them?**

I was deciding what to do with one of my summers and decided to jump aboard a humanitarian outreach trip with RADION to clear my CSP (community service programme; fulfillment of a minimum of 80 hours of community service is mandatory for all SMU undergraduates) hours. During this trip, we organised an educational excursion for village children from traumatic backgrounds and food distributions for impoverished villagers.

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During this time, I remember meeting a teenager addicted to glue sniffing. On our first meeting, he was dazed and intoxicated so I remained wary of him. The next time, he returned again fully conscious this time, so I had the opportunity to talk to him. In our interactions, I learnt that he chose to sniff glue because while a dollar spent on food will stave away hunger for half a day, a dollar spent on glue would allow him to 'escape' from hunger longer. It was then that it hit home for me – that the villagers here were that poor and something needed to be done!

**What made you decide to pursue a career so different from what you had originally conceived?**

I learnt that the Hmong face a myriad of sociocultural problems arising from deeper underlying needs. For example, girls were getting married too early because most parents did not see the importance of education. This causes them to grow up poor, unable to provide for their own children.

Much had to be done particularly in the area of influencing development among the Hmong people. I learnt this in theory in my studies, but it was the first time I saw the reality and immensity of what development would mean for these people. I saw the beauty of being able to change lives.

The final decision was not easy. It was not just because I would forego the lucrative starting salary entitled to most SMU graduates, I also had to convince my parents who had expectations about my future.

In the end, I am thankful for my parents' openness to visiting the village last year. I shared with them why the Hmong people meant so much to me and they gave me their blessing to pursue this unorthodox career path.

**Tell us about your role at RADION and some of the challenges of your role.**

My main role at RADION is the leadership and management of volunteers that travel up to the village to carry out developmental projects – from running mobile clinics and coordinating construction during building projects, to working with children during children's outreach events.

Singaporeans have the potential to augment developmental work in the village, but only if they are properly guided to intervene in culturally sensitive and sustainable ways. This is where the leadership and mentorship aspect for volunteers is very important.

Challenges of this role are vast. It is a steep learning curve where I'm expected to pick up as much knowledge as possible in a very short span of time. This is how we get to value-add to the villagers' local expertise instead of creating more liabilities for them. I remember being required to study a manual on rural pig farming in order to understand better the operations behind our Integrated Pig Farm. The manual was over 100 pages long! From there, we can then begin to have meaningful discussions with the villagers about the use of more productive farming technologies.

**What is the most surprising insight you have taken away from your current role?**

Humanitarian and developmental work should not be seen as an easier path than a conventional 9-to-5 job in the corporate sector. I've interned twice in a bank and I don't think what I do now is easier.

If anything, we're pressed to push harder and longer because the stakes here are much higher. If we lose focus in the corporate sector, we only lose business or reputation. Here, we lose lives.

Those who want to go into humanitarian work should also find ways to credibly value-add to the lives of local communities. This comes through building relationships with the locals – it's about learning from them first, before we can start thinking of ways to help them develop. At the end of the day, a successful partnership between first and third-world really boils down to effective knowledge sharing between both worlds.

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