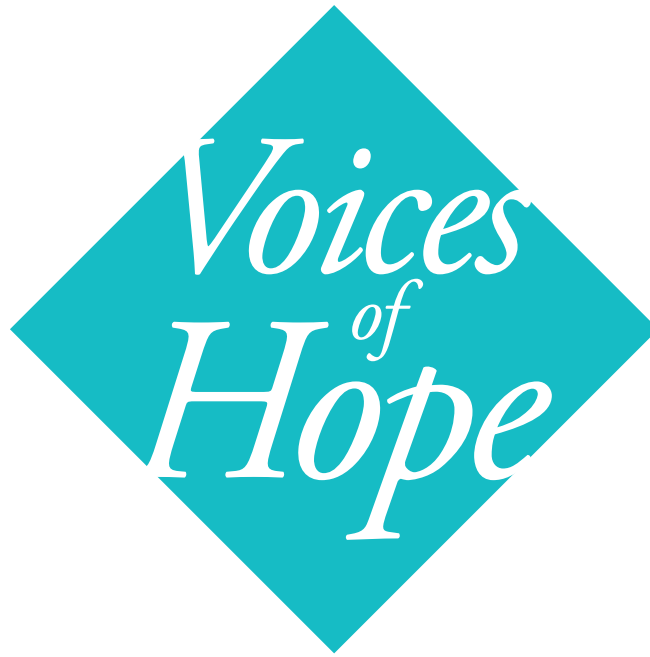


# *Voices of Hope*

PROFILES OF HEALTH EQUITY LEADERS  
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



*Atlantic Fellows*



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# Foreword

**A**fter each Induction Year period, the Equity Initiative (EI) encourages and supports our fellows to carry out group projects among the fellows to engage with each other and work together to put into practice the core values of health equity and leadership. Setting out to find and elevate inspirational personal stories for health equity, Lawrence Aritao and Do Thuy Duong (of the EI Cohort 2017) decided to team up to learn more about their amazing colleagues for their second-year project titled “Voices of Hope”. The result is a unique collection of profiles of selected EI Fellows from the 2017 cohort and 2018 cohort.

So, what makes this project different from the other health equity projects that we have seen? – For one, the spotlight is turned on the equity warriors themselves. The stated goal of this book is “... for the reading audience... to find inspiration from the leaders and social change figures

surrounding them.” The narratives shared glimpses into the lives of the selected fellows, their values, their dreams, what motivated them, and how they overcame challenges and adversities.

Using the story-telling approach, the project hopes to “bring readers closer to diverse exemplars in health equity, illustrating that each human being has the potential to participate in creating healthier, more equitable and humane communities.” Lawrence and Duong succeeded in elevating the shared values the EI community, such as courage, humility, service, kindness, resilience, empowering others, tolerance and inclusivity. The visual artworks also add further reflective and aesthetic dimension to the individuals that we have come to know and appreciate over the years.

We hope that the readers will identify the shared values of humanity that bind us all together, and the aspiration to create our own amazing stories to add to this remarkable collection in the years to come.



With gratitude,

*Le Nhan Phuong*

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# Introduction

**T**his volume features profiles of leaders serving in disparate but connected sectors: public health, the private sector, at-risk communities, children with special needs, business, education, and government.

Featured individuals are members of the Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity in Southeast Asia (also known locally as The Equity Initiative), a growing community of leaders from all sectors of society that share a common goal of creating healthier, fairer, more equitable communities.

We envisioned this volume to be a celebration of the work of outstanding Fellows, and a source of ideas and inspiration for those who may be contemplating how they might make their mark in their communities.

Accompanying every feature is a beautiful portrait of each Fellow, created by Filipino artist Ninna Juan Del Mundo, who artfully captured the personality and likeness of each leader.

We hope that these stories and art pieces resonate with you and remind you of the power you have to create change and empower others to do the same.

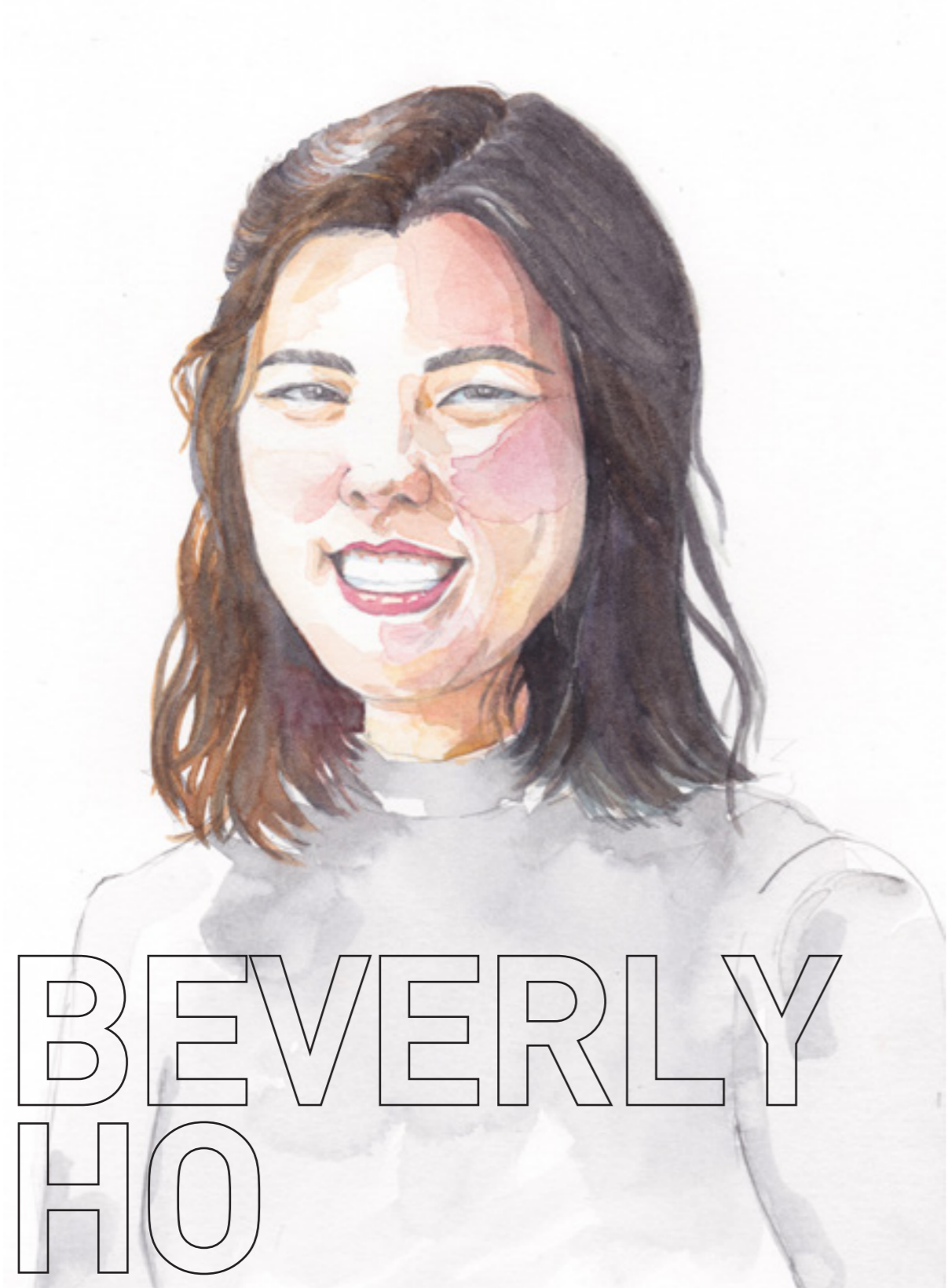


*Lawrence E. Aritao*

Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity in Southeast Asia, 2017 Cohort



*Do Thuy Duong*



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# The Silent Worker

by Tisha Alvarez

*In her quiet, unassuming way, the 35-year-old chief of policy development at the Department of Health is working hard to change the state of Philippine public health.*

**O**ne afternoon in April 2019, a group of new hires was sitting in a small office in Metro Manila, Philippines. They were hearing about the terms of their employment and, at the end of the briefing, one worker raised his hand to ask if they would also receive medical benefits for their families. The woman in charge shook her head but added an encouraging note: “Di ba mayroon na tayong Universal Health Bill? Sabi ni Duterte, lahat daw automatic na na PhilHealth .”

“Isn’t it that we now have the Universal Health Bill? Duterte says that everyone is now automatically enrolled to PhilHealth.”

Hearing of this anecdote, Beverly Ho remarked, “Naku, sana matupad talaga ang promise!” (“Oh, I really hope the promise will be fulfilled!”)

Ho, the chief of the Health Policy Development and Planning Bureau of the Department of Health (DOH), was instrumental in the drafting of the Universal Health Care (UHC) Law, or Republic Act No. 11223. Signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on February 20, 2019, the law ultimately seeks to provide health care to all Filipinos. As of this writing, the Implementing Rules and Regulations are still being finalized but the law has gotten many people excited about its implications.

While news coverage acknowledged the authors of the law in the Upper and Lower Houses, it didn’t mention all the others who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to help ensure that the law was something that would be beneficial to the Filipino people. The DOH came on board in 2017 when the bill was in its early stages in

the Lower House; Ho was sent as the DOH representative at a hearing, which eventually led to DOH involvement in developing the bill.

“In one of the proposals, I actually found... some things na sobrang no-no, kaya parang I felt kailangan ko aralin yung stand namin,” recalls Ho.

(“In one of the proposals, I actually found... some things that were a definite no-no, so I felt that I really had to study our stand.”)

She elaborates, “Top things come to mind [were the] creation of a fund on top of PhilHealth, which will further fragment [the system], [and the] creation of a super body multi-agency board to oversee UHC, which will be another layer of bureaucracy, with unclear basis for decisions.”

Ho thus felt that she had to “make a very, very strong position paper for the DOH kasi what if pumasa 'to [in its current form]? It would be [more of a] step back than step forward. Actually, mas yun yung motivation ko more than anything.”

(“I had to make a very, very strong position paper for the DOH because what if this passes [in its current form]? It would be more of a step back than a step forward. Actually, that was my motivation more than anything.”)

Armed with her knowledge of and years of experience in public health and public policy, Ho got to work. But she stresses that she didn't do it alone, always insisting that it was a group effort. Throughout the process, she remained motivated by the people around her, who all similarly had the mission and desire to make positive, lasting changes.

### THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

This is Ho's approach to work in general, whether it's helping lawmakers finetune the Universal Health Care Law, pushing for regulations governing Health Impact Assessment in the Philippines, or meeting her other responsibilities at the DOH: Credit isn't important. What matters is that the work gets done and that it hopefully contributes to the greater good.

Her interest in public health was nurtured during her days studying medicine at the University of the Philippines (UP). Initially planning to become a doctor—like her mother, who is still a practicing obstetrician-gynecologist at 70—Ho found her interest gradually shifting as she met more and more people who had a medical background but didn't necessarily work as doctors.

“Sa UP naman to begin with, our teachers are mostly activists, apart from being the

best clinicians sa PGH (Philippine General Hospital) . Some have done stints in different NGOs, government, et cetera,” she says. “Our curriculum was also made in such a way that they call it COME, Community-Oriented Medical Education. Basically, they're saying we don't need to be directly in the barrios, in the communities for us to practice community oriented-ness in health care.”

She cites one seven-day seminar in particular that really made an impression on her. “In one week, they flooded you with people who were not your typical doctors, who were doing all sorts of things... And then after that, I was class president of my batch in UP...so I also got to see the behind the scenes ng mga teachers namin who were also administrators sa PGH. So parang nakita mo why are we, for example, asking our patients to line up at four in the morning tapos ten o'clock it's just us who sees them, not even real doctors? And then why is there so much inefficiency in that hospital whereas all our administrators are the best of the best in their fields?”

Her exposure to the day-to-day realities in a public hospital led her to question whether becoming a clinician, regarded as a noble profession, was really the best way for her to help. Her peers, who were once as wide-eyed and idealistic as she was, started pursuing private practice in order to earn a decent living to support their growing families. Ho thought, “Maybe hindi mauubusan ng clinicians but maybe people who want to help need to be given the opportunity to help out. (Maybe we won't run out of clinicians but maybe people who want to help need to be given the opportunity to help.) And if my classmates, who are very well-intentioned, happen to not have that opportunity, the world or the country cannot blame them for choosing to just do private practice at the end of the day.”

There was some pressure from relatives to follow in her mom's footsteps and take over the OB-GYN practice, but after much reflection, Ho spoke with her parents, saying she wanted to explore other things for a year before going back to the clinics. One month before she was supposed to apply for residency, she got a call about a job at PhilHealth. Ho prayed over it, offered a mass for it, and even went to a Chinese

fortune teller, who told her that whatever it was she was asking about would open doors for her. “I got my divine bases covered so now [I had to talk to] my parents,” she says with a laugh.

Ho outlined her plan in a five-page letter to her parents, who didn't question her decision to take the PhilHealth job. “My time in PhilHealth [was] very short but very impactful,” says Ho. “*Nakita* ng parents ko na *mukhang* serious [ako] dito. They never asked me *kung babalik ako or hinde* [to the clinics]. Since then, *tuloy-tuloy na*, super supportive *na lang nila*.”

(“My parents saw that it seemed like I was serious about this. They never asked me if I was going to go back [to the clinics] or not. Since then, they have been continuously super supportive.”)

### MAKING AN IMPACT

Since then, Ho has gone on to attain a Masters degree in Public Health, Healthcare Policy, and Management from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and has worked as a researcher and consultant for various organizations, including the Asian Development Bank. One of her first few projects as a junior consultant was for a UHC stock-taking, where she was tasked to attend to the needs of experts coming in from different countries. She soaked up all she could from the experts—“I was just like a sponge!”—and was able to foster relationships with them, which came in handy when she was working on the UHC Bill. “Throughout the process of the bill, randomly ako nag-email sa kanila, na parang, ‘Tama ba 'tong ginagawa namin?’ Kasi wala ka namang guidance, 'di ba.”

(“Throughout the process of the bill, I would randomly email them, like, ‘Are we on the right track?’ Because you don't really have any guidance.”)

Even with the passing of the landmark law, there is still a long way to go, and Ho underscores the importance of collaborating with the right people to reach the goal. “We can have the best ideas but if you don't have the best people—good head, good heart, good hand, as the Thais would say—it will be very difficult.”

This is also the reason why she hopes to attract more people to the field of public health. “I really want that public health and public policy will get a share of the best graduates, the best talents, not just of health professions but of others as well,” she says. Her vision is for the DOH and PhilHealth to attract the top talents because in the end, policies are only as good as the people who make and implement them.

“How other countries have sustained reforms, have translated good ideas to actual working services for the people is when yung capacity ng civil service is just there. [In the] UK and Australia, sobrang alaga yung civil service nila. Kung sobrang alaga, it translates—yung quality ng decision, yung know-how. May isa nga kaming local consultant na nagsabi, you want to invest in your ability to think quickly and act quickly and walang other investments except tao.”

(“[In the] UK and Australia, they really take care of their civil service workers. If they are nurtured, it translates—the quality of decisions, the know-how. We even had a local consultant who said that you want to invest in your ability to think quickly and act quickly and there are no other investments except people.”)

This desire to get the best people working in public health is probably a big reason why Ho has honed her intuition for talent over the years. She shares, “When I spot talent and good heart, alam ko. Ipaglalaban ko yung taong yon hanggang dulo. I will look for opportunities for that person kasi sobrang I think very clear sa akin na I'm only able to sell the vision and parang put the scaffold to whatever we want for public health but kailangan siya i-implement ng critical mass. So, parang mission ko sa buhay, feeling ko, is hanapin yung mga tao para magsama-sama sila.”

(“When I spot talent and good heart, I really know. I would fight for this person until the end. I will look for opportunities for that person because I think it's very clear to me that I'm only able to sell the vision and put the scaffold to whatever we want for public health but it has to be implemented by critical mass. So, I feel like my mission in life is to look for the people who will work together.”)



While Ho finds the work itself stimulating and doesn't really seek any reward or recognition, she grants that it does come with perks. "We have to admit that being where I am in government has certainly opened up so [many] doors for me in terms of meeting people I never thought I'd be meeting and having opportunities I thought I'd never had," she says. "So, parang umiikot lang siya. Parang the little good will na ini-invest ko to be in public service, parang God makes a way to remind me that compensates for [it]."

("So, it's like what goes around comes around. Like the little good will that I invest in public service, it's like God makes a way to remind me that compensates for [it].")

She cited a short-term program at Yale University as one example; the Equity Initiative (EI) fellowship was another: A Department of Health undersecretary simply asked Ho to represent her in a meeting with Jeremy Lim, an inaugural fellow of EI. "After that meeting, the rest is history!" says Ho.

#### THE NEXT GENERATION

When Ho started out, there were very few of them who chose to pursue a career in public policy and public health. But nowadays, she says more and more of the younger generation are getting in touch with her, asking her how to get started in the field. The DOH also previously ran a policy research program wherein they got graduates of top-tier schools to work in the department for two years. "[DOH] Secretary [Francisco Duque III] also agreed na maybe this is the way to go to make things sustainable, so within the year, we're launching a UHC Young Professionals

Program," she says. Thus, it seems quite possible that Ho will realize her vision of attracting top graduates sooner rather than later.

She does emphasize that along with talent, those who go into public policy and public health should be able to set aside their ego. "A lot of us went into medicine because there's this part of you [that] wants to help, 'di ba. But this part of you [that] wants to help is also encouraged by constant appreciation, thank you's," she remarks. "Pero sa public health and public policy, wala namang nagpapasalamat sa 'yo. As long as you're ready na walang credit, pwede ka. Kasi hindi mo naman pwedeng sabihing, 'Ako yung nagsulat ng batas,' kasi it's a confluence of a lot of things, di ba... If your personality does not allow for that, mahihirapan ka. Pero kung game ka, anything else pwede namang aralin."

("But in public health and public policy, there is no one to thank you. As long as you're ready not to take credit, you're good to go. Because you can't really say, 'I wrote this law,' because it's a confluence of a lot of things... If your personality does not allow for that, you'll have a hard time. But if you're game, anything else can be learned.")

More than having these qualities herself, backed by her education, innate intelligence, and experience, perhaps what makes Ho good at what she does is this: She truly cares. Her eyes light up when she talks about the work they're doing and, despite the challenges and the occasional rumor-mongering in the workplace, she remains excited by what she does. To Beverly Ho, working in public policy and public health is not just a job but a real opportunity to make a difference in people's lives.

*\*Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, Beverly Ho took on the position of Director, Office of Health Promotion and Communication Service with the Department of Health. During the Philippine community quarantine, Beverly assisted in the government's inter-agency response to the pandemic. Her team was instrumental in the production of daily COVID19 infographic briefs, making relevant data widely accessible. She remains active in the public health space, and worked with Atlantic Fellows in the Philippines and broader public health networks to help address the issue of rising suicides during the pandemic.*





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# The Equalizer

by Tisha Alvarez

*Somporn Pengkam is fighting for everyone's right to decide on their future, one community at a time.*

**S**omporn Pengkam uses the word “lucky” frequently in conversation. She says she was “lucky” that she began her work in health impact assessment (HIA) just as the Thai government was making health system reforms. She says she was “lucky” to get support from friends in different fields when she took on a multinational company that was illegally dumping waste. And she says she was “lucky” to have been chosen as a consultant to help create an HIA framework in the Philippines, beating out numerous other candidates for the role. (This last project would lead to her winning the inaugural Atlantic Senior Fellows Award with Beverly Ho, another Equity Initiative fellow—a feat Pengkam would also likely describe as “lucky.”)

While it's true that good fortune may have played a part in all of these, Pengkam seems to gloss over the main reason behind her achievements: her initiative, hard work, and commitment. A nurse-turned-HIA champion, Pengkam saw the need for a greater understanding of how development can affect communities and took it upon herself to learn everything she could to help protect their rights.

#### FILLING A GAP

Pengkam, 48, is currently the director of an independent CHIA platform in Southeast Asia, a nonprofit organization that she established in 2018. CHIA has long existed in one form or another in Thailand, as Pengkam writes in a paper entitled “Revitalizing Thailand’s Community Health Impact Assessment”:

“Community Health Impact Assessment (CHIA) has long been conducted in Thailand. The methodology is social norm and belief oriented. We believe in interconnectedness and pay respect to our ancestor’s spirit and nature. We consider natural resources as Divine God such as Mother Earth, Water God, Rice God and etc. Some part of Thailand, for example northeast, has its own traditional rule that no one dare to violate because it may cause disaster. With these beliefs, whenever a community initiates activities, villagers will discuss until all sides satisfy. The process of discussion invites villagers to participate in policy decision making at their community.”

In the succeeding paragraph, Pengkam rues the movement away from these roots in modern times: “Since Thailand has geared up to modernization, the social norms and beliefs of the community have been devalued. High and complicated technology has replaced local wisdom. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been introduced with a scientific base. Hence spiritual belief of the community has been gradually ignored. It is led [sic] to conflict in communities.”

Pengkam thus ventured into CHIA out of necessity. She says that it started around 17 years ago, when a Canadian Potash mining company tried to obtain a license to start operations in Udon Thani, her hometown. She narrates, “I was working for a nursing college there and the villagers asked me about the health impact assessment, and I cannot answer the question. I said, ‘Oh, I’m from nursing, I don’t know about the impact from Potash mining; I know only to care [for] persons in hospital.’ And the villagers said, ‘You are academia and a health professional. If you don’t know, how would we know and how would we make a decision, if it’s good or bad for us?’”

That spurred Pengkam into action. “I started researching about what is health impact assessment and how to do it, what is it about, the timeline,” she says. At that time, there were no laws or guidelines in Thailand so she largely had to rely on self-study.

“I’m so lucky that I got funding from the Health System Research Institute to do the pilot project about the health impact assessment,” she says. She reviewed the guidelines from Canada, adamant that a Canadian company should be held to the same standard in Thailand.

Her work on this project made her realize the importance of setting guidelines and disseminating information to communities that may be affected by mining and other similar industries. It also caught the attention of a medical doctor who was putting together a team for the National Health System Reform Office, at a time when the National Health Act of Thailand was being drafted. He asked Pengkam to join his research team and she agreed, seeing it as an opportunity to include HIA in public policy.

Once the law was passed, the National Health System Reform Office became the National Health Commission Office. Pengkam resigned from her post at the nursing college and worked at the office as Director of the HIA Coordinating Unit.

#### THE FORCE AWAKENS

At first, things were going well. Pengkam could do her work with the support of cabinet and even the prime minister. But a particular case seven years ago caused a shift in Pengkam. She was asked by a local university in Chacheongsao province to assess the illegal dumping of waste in a well by a company. A committee was sent to investigate but the villagers were distrustful of the results. “The villagers tried to call police and every regulator, but they did nothing. There was a very bad smell and many people got sick,” says Pengkam.





She had dialogues with the community, checked the dump site, and collected samples for analysis. The situation turned out to be quite dire as it affected not just the residents but also the farms. “It’s about food security... It’s not only for the people in the community, but you do agriculture, you produce food, you export to somewhere. If this area is contaminated, it means the food is contaminated. Other people who have the food will get sick,” she explains.

Pengkam got to work and didn’t think there would be any major repercussions as they didn’t put on a protest. But one morning, a community leader was gunned down and killed at the market, a clear message being sent to those who were working on the case. Pengkam was shaken.

“I was shocked when I arrived at the community, at the temple—many people came to me and hugged me. And I said, ‘Are you scared? If you’re scared we can stop.’ And they said, ‘No, no, no. The community leader passed away already... We should follow his lead, how to treat this area, how to make this safe for everyone, for our children.’ [And I said] ‘Okay, I will not leave you. I will fight everything, do everything with you.’”

Normally a behind-the-scenes worker who shies away from the media, Pengkam resolved to shine the spotlight on this case. “After that, I told the media, ‘I will be a speaker for this case. Interview me,’” she says. She collected more data, despite warnings that she would be sued by the company. And this is where some of her luck came into play: A friend who was a lawyer working for a non-profit organization got in touch with her to say that she had their support. Then experts from various fields, including medical faculty at Chulalongkorn University, looked at the data with her and helped formulate solutions.

Pengkam submitted her well-researched, science-backed findings to the higher-ups. But the day before it was to be passed for review by the National Health Commission, the secretarial team told her that it would be withdrawn, saying the research was unclear and did not consult all stakeholders. Pengkam kept asking “Why?” All stakeholders had come together to propose the best solution, and previous recommendations for other cases had made it through the commission to the cabinet and ultimately to the prime minister without a hitch.

“He kept quiet and I said, ‘I will not see anyone die [any] more. I need to solve this problem now. A community leader was killed. I need to protect them, it’s my duty,’” she says. “Everyone kept quiet. So, I walked out of the meeting.”

Together with the governor, Pengkam worked on a proposal for cleaning the well and rehabilitating the area, which they submitted to parliament. After that, she resigned from the National Health Commission Office, disillusioned. “[I believed that] if the policy makers have strong evidence and the right information to support their decision making, I thought they would make a decision to protect everyone. But it’s not [the case],” she says. “If I cannot protect the community, [there is] no meaning for me to work here.”

The community eventually sued the company and won.

#### WORKING TOWARDS EQUALITY

Pengkam feels like she has grown since her experience with the government, especially after joining the Thai Leadership Program and the Equity Initiative (EI).

“When I was working for the National Health Commission Office, I was quite self-centered. I had high self-confidence and a lot of ego because I thought I worked so hard, I tried to protect everybody, I had strong power,” she says. “But when I joined the [Thai Leadership] program, I [had a] more open heart. I [became] open to connecting to others different from me. I learned to listen.”

Joining EI in 2017 took her leadership skills to the next level: “I learned a lot about adaptive leadership. I learned how to deal with difficult situations... how to [go] step by step. And I learned how to work with others... not too fast, because if I work too fast, I leave many people behind. I learned to work slow and [with] care, with a team.”

Having grown as a leader, Pengkam now heads an organization that works with various communities around Southeast Asia. “I do this to empower people to do HIA by themselves and can negotiate with policy makers by themselves,” she says. “I would like to see equity in terms of every sector, especially the community [to] have the right to engage in the decision making, and have the right to determine their future. Not a top-down policy but they have the right to have a choice [when it comes to] what kind of development they would like. Because for me, people [on the] community side are powerless in the public policy process. The powerful [ones are] from the government or the business sector.”

She stresses that she isn’t against development but that everyone should have a say. “My life’s mission is to make it equal.”

Pengkam may feel like she’s the lucky one, but it’s the communities who are lucky to have her tirelessly fighting for their rights and protecting their welfare.





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# The Net Contributor

by Tisha Alvarez

*Sati Rasuanto was the co-founder and managing director of Endeavor Indonesia, which gives high-impact entrepreneurs the tools to thrive. The mother of two looks ever forward, constantly on the lookout for things to build and ways to give back to the world.*

**W**hether she's sitting in a café for an interview, attending a workshop with other Endeavor fellows, or speaking onstage in front of a big crowd, one thing remains the same for Sati Rasuanto: At some point, she won't have any shoes on.

"Even when I host Endeavor events—big ones with, like, 2,500 people—I would be barefoot onstage. I wouldn't realize it. I just...take them off!" she says with a laugh. "I don't know why I hate shoes. When my board was finding my replacement, they said, 'It's really hard to fill your shoes.' And I said, 'No shoes!'"

Rasuanto is referring to a post she vacated in April 2019. The 41-year-old served as managing director of Endeavor Indonesia, an organization she co-founded to support a network of high-impact entrepreneurs. At the time of this interview, she was on sabbatical, after having been with Endeavor for seven years. It was a role she took on after stints as a financial consultant, as an energy specialist/operations officer at the World Bank, and as part of the staff of the Minister of Investment in Indonesia.

## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

It was Rasuanto's time in government that opened the doors of Endeavor for her. In 2011, the minister had a guest named Cindy Ko from Endeavor's head office in New York, and she and Rasuanto sat down to talk about the organization's viability in Indonesia.

"The conversation with me evolved around 1) Do you think Indonesia is the right place to have something like this, given that at the time, an entrepreneurial ecosystem didn't exist really? And 2) Do you think there are seasoned entrepreneurs and business leaders who would like to be the patron of this initiative to start with?" recalls Rasuanto.

Her answer to both questions was yes. And so, she helped connect Ko with people who might be able to help her further explore the idea. A few months later, Ko met with Rasuanto again, this time to say that they had decided that Indonesia was indeed a good place for Endeavor to launch. But, she added, "we should actually get somebody to want to start it here. And we think it should be you."

Although it was an interesting proposition, the timing was a little off—Rasuanto was about to leave Indonesia to spend six months in the U.S. as a Yale World Fellow. "I actually recommended a few people to her and then I went off to the U.S.," she says. "Around September, October, Cindy called me again and said, 'I think we want to wait for you if you are open to it.'" Rasuanto made the commute from the Yale campus to Endeavor's New York office a few times to meet the founder and get to know more about the organization. The visits confirmed that Endeavor was a good fit for Indonesia.

According to Rasuanto, there was virtually no entrepreneurial ecosystem in her home country back in 2012. Many companies were just offshoots of bigger conglomerates controlled by the wealthy few. There weren't many self-made entrepreneurs—less than 1% in a country with a population of 250 million. And many startups didn't make it past the third or even the first year. Rasuanto envisioned Endeavor Indonesia to be an organization to help fledgling businesses that had impact-driven—rather than profit-driven—founders, enabling them to scale up from their start-up phase.

## PERFECT TIMING

Had Endeavor Indonesia come calling at an earlier time, Rasuanto may not have decided to take it on. But because it came at the heels of her time at Yale, she was more receptive to the role. She explains, "Before Yale, I really believed that one person cannot do much. So, whenever I work or pick a project, I really believed in the power of leveraging a platform. So, I worked in the government or in the World Bank. I worked on things that were big-scale so that me [as] one person can, like, hop on that platform and sort of amplify whatever it is that I'm doing that way."

But the Yale fellowship exposed her to inspiring individuals who were creating change on their own, such as the opposition leader against Russian President Vladimir Putin or someone who organized rallies against then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. "That sort of gave me the confidence to say, 'Oh, I as one person can do something in a smaller organization and still have an impact that is bigger than one times one,'" she says.



## THE EI IMPACT

In the following years, Rasuanto went on to join two more fellowships that helped her become a more well-rounded leader: the Kauffman fellowship in 2014, which was geared mainly towards investors in tech companies and, to an extent, ecosystem builders like Rasuanto; and, in 2017, the Equity Initiative (EI).

While the Yale fellowship made her feel more empowered as an individual, the EI fellowship allowed Rasuanto to see herself as a different kind of leader. She already had an understanding of how transformational a fellowship could be, but EI came at a time when Rasuanto was exploring health entrepreneurship, which was in its nascent stages in Indonesia. “How great would it be, right, if entrepreneurship is actually used to improve the human development index, means, education, and health? Yet the number of companies working on this issue, you could count by hands,” she says.

Another barrier to industry growth was that entrepreneurs in the health space needed a certain degree of knowledge and expertise—whether they were doctors, nurses, or community health workers—to be able to properly solve problems and address issues. Rasuanto admits that prior to becoming an EI fellow, she didn’t know much about health equity beyond its textbook definition. “So, I walked into [EI] thinking that I want to foster more health entrepreneurs. I had no idea how to do that so let me just do this right and meet a lot of people who are working in this space,” she says.

Another factor that made EI especially interesting to Rasuanto was its Southeast Asian roots, as she wanted to get a clearer picture of the situation across the region. She reflects, “I always saw myself as an Indonesian girl. So, every time there was an opportunity to work outside Indonesia or for a non-Indonesian cause, I go, ‘Hmm, not sure.’ I didn’t even realize it was because I was so nationalistic in my Indonesian identity. I just thought I wasn’t interested enough.”

She continues, “But one of the things we were exposed to within this program is that we saw, at a grassroots level, different equity problems. Sometimes in health but also not in health. We saw it in Manila, we saw it in Laos, in India, in different places, even in the U.S.” That experience made her realize that suffering is suffering everywhere, and that helping people in other countries is no different from helping people in Indonesia.

“I now see myself more as a truly global-slash-Southeast-Asian person that can actually make a difference not just in Indonesia but anywhere else too, if needed. I think that’s a huge shift for me, personally, in addition to learning all the technical stuff about health and health equity,” she shares.

## MOVING FORWARD

Endeavor Indonesia has helped change the entrepreneurial landscape in Indonesia over the past seven years, through programs and events like “speed mentorship,” featuring leaders of the biggest multinational companies in the country. But the organization hasn’t just helped

the entrepreneurs; it has also awakened an entrepreneurial spirit in the mentors (some have gone on to start their own businesses) and in Rasuanto herself.

“I think I have the entrepreneur’s bug. I’ve always loved building things in all of the jobs I took on,” she says. Her next phase? “I think it’s going to be in the start-up space. It is likely to be a technology company. I think that’s what’s next. And hopefully, it’s a technology company that actually helps the country,” she reveals.

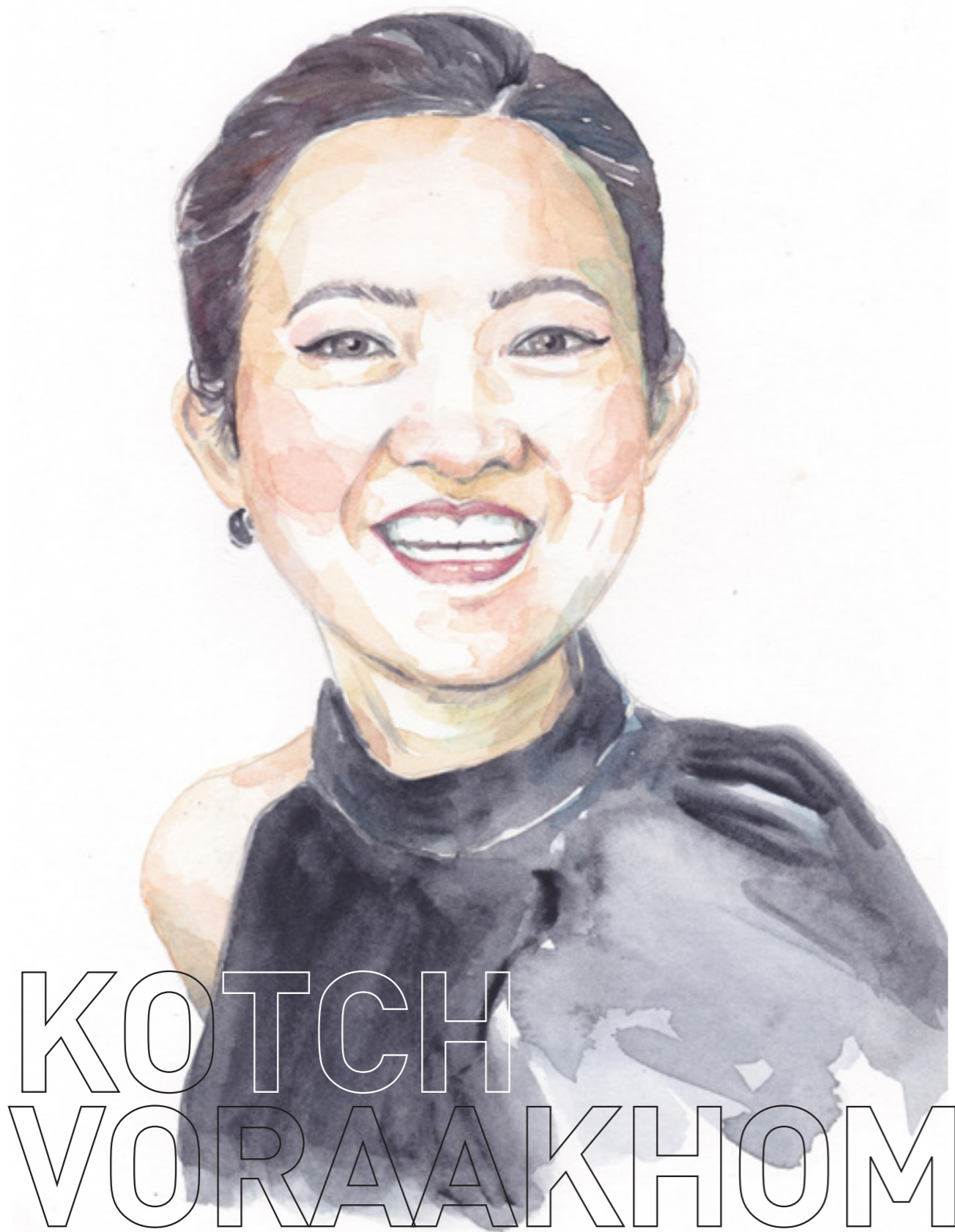
As with her previous sabbatical, she has been using this time to “break down her identity,” which she finds quite healing “because then you know what sticks” beyond any of the pomp and benefits of what her previous role offered. When considering her options, she finds the balance between doing what she’s good at and being able to fulfill her responsibilities at home. And she also remembers the words of wisdom of her late father, who cautioned against becoming someone who simply used her head and hands to work, but not her heart.

Ultimately, she is guided by her desire to be a net contributor. “I want to contribute more than I consume. I feel like the world has given me a lot, so I also need to contribute a lot,” she says.

Whatever Rasuanto chooses to do next, she’ll go into it with arms and heart wide open—and, very likely, no shoes on her feet.



*Since the COVID 19 pandemic, Sati through her new startup has worked on solutions with government to help ensure aid reaches the right small businesses and individuals in a streamlined manner. Her startup, VIDA (Verified Identity for all), aims to provide reliable and swift identity verification to ensure that transactions are safe for all the parties involved, enhancing data privacy & enabling financial inclusion*



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# Seeing Green

by Tisha Alvarez

*A landscape architect, Kotch Voraakhom seeks to turn her hometown of Bangkok, Thailand into a resilient city that can combat the effects of climate change.*

**W**hen people envision a city of the future, they most likely picture flying cars zooming past skyscrapers, an endless landscape of concrete and glass. But for Kotch Voraakhom, a city of the future means a place that remains connected to nature, with pockets of green inserted in a vast urban sprawl.

Voraakhom is the founder and CEO of Porous City Network, a landscape architecture firm whose mission is to make more resilient cities by addressing ecological concerns through innovative design. As she narrates in a TED Talk, Voraakhom grew up with the concrete jungle as her playground, delighting in the little plants that she could see growing through the cracks in the cement. She later channeled this love for green things and her innate creativity into a landscape architecture course, eventually obtaining a Master's degree from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Voraakhom didn't see herself using her skills to design resorts or golf courses and instead took an interest in public spaces. But after a few years abroad working on projects she wasn't passionate about, she decided to move back to Bangkok. However, she says, "in Thailand, we didn't have the job that I was looking for." So, she founded her own design firm with a staff of three.

Serendipitously, a design competition was launched to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok's oldest university. The school called on designers and architects to submit proposals for the Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park, the first major park project in Bangkok in 30 years. A veritable who's who of the Bangkok design world joined the competition. Voraakhom's groundbreaking design was chosen as the winner.

## THE FIRST OF ITS KIND

When conceptualizing the design of the park, Voraakhom thought about one of Bangkok's main problems: It's a sinking city that is constantly flooded. The urban sprawl was built on wetlands, with infrastructure covering up old canals and waterways. As a result, rainwater has nowhere to go, inundating the city even after just 15 minutes of rain. This was what led her to design a park that is able to retain and recycle rainwater.

While Voraakhom acknowledges that other competition entries may have had more beautiful forms or addressed even deeper ecological issues, she believes that her firm's winning design directly addressed a real concern in Bangkok and put the university at the forefront of resilience design. "We inclined the whole park to collect rain and [built] the biggest green roof in Thailand. And then all the rainfall goes to the wetland first and then the reservoir," she explains.

The gently sloping park can collect up to a million gallons of rainwater, which travels from the highest point (the green roof) to the lowest point (the retention pond). It attracts many visitors with its other features: an amphitheater where events

like music festivals are held (with the green roof serving as a makeshift stage), jogging trails where moms push strollers along, wetlands where kids can play, and outdoor seating areas where students can gather. Stationary bikes were placed by the pond to help visitors get some exercise. Simultaneously circulating water in the pond. All these are set against a lush backdrop of plants and trees that have attracted new wildlife to the area. Roads surrounding the park were expanded, not to accommodate more cars, but to make way for tree-lined walkways and bike lanes.

The award-winning park is now an oasis in the middle of Bangkok, with its highest point providing a unique, sweeping view of the flat city. But completing the project was not without its challenges: Some stakeholders doubted Voraakhom's abilities as she was fairly new in the industry in Bangkok and this was her first park.

"Many people told me to give up because I was very stressed," she recalls. "[But] I felt like this was such a lifetime opportunity and it might not come again... And this is my passion. Sometimes, some clients don't want you, want to kick you out, hire someone better, a more experienced designer who they trust. [But] I had to just really stick around. If you feel hopeless, you go to sleep, and then wake up the next day, and do it again."



She took inspiration from her hardworking parents and reminded herself that the real failure is in giving up. And she was spurred on by her best quality: "I think I'm very crazy," she says with a laugh. "When people say you are crazy, I feel that is such a compliment! Because craziness pushes you to the edge with courage in a way that normal circumstances [won't]. Craziness gives you the courage to do it anyway. I [did] it with three people! My staff is really tired now," she quips. (She now has over a dozen people working in her firm.)

## AMPLIFYING HER MISSION

Her ingenious park design earned her a spot in a number of prestigious fellowships: the Asia Foundation Fellowship, the Echoing Green Fellowship, the TED Fellowship, the Equity Initiative (EI), and the Atlantic Fellows. Each experience refined her ideas, built up her confidence, and exposed her to like-minded individuals, both in Asia and beyond.

The TED Fellowship is somewhat different from other fellowships as it favors those who have already taken an idea and run with it, as opposed to those who were just shaping their ideas. Voraakhom's Centenary Park fit the criteria quite nicely. "I think it's not only the idea itself but people are looking for a solution for climate change," she says. "We have been talking about it for several years. Policy doesn't move much, right? So, I think [people] are longing for real implementation... I think this park became a tangible [example of what] people can do."

While the TED Talk that came with the fellowship gave her plenty of exposure and amplified her message, the EI fellowship added another dimension to her work in quieter, deeper way. Prior to joining EI, Voraakhom's main concern was addressing climate change, but the fellowship helped her see the bigger picture: Improving public spaces doesn't just mitigate floods and lessen air pollution but is also beneficial to public health.



Top: Kotchakorn Voraakhom speaks during Fellows Session at TED2018 - The Age of Amazement, April 10 - 14, 2018, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Photo: Ryan Lash / TED  
Bottom: Kotchakorn Voraakhom speaks during Fellows Session at TED2018 - The Age of Amazement, April 10 - 14, 2018, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Photo: Ryan Lash / TED



Voraakhom has come to realize that the Centenary Park, for example, can help people feel relaxed, give them a space to decompress, and ultimately help keep diseases at bay. EI has thus strengthened her advocacy of building a greener city. After all, she says, “If you don’t have a healthy city, how can people be healthy?”

**BRANCHING OUT**

Much like the raintree—one of her inspirations behind the design of the Centenary Park—Voraakhom’s work has the potential to grow far-reaching roots and branches, giving new life to a city that is sinking under the weight of rapid development. Voraakhom is intent on introducing more ways to address her hometown’s problems and believes it

doesn’t have to be on the same scale as the Centenary Park. After all, it’s difficult to find space in an already crowded city. “It’s not necessary to have a [really big] space but there has to be a concern with how you deal with water. [A] building can have a rainwater tank or have enough green space,” she says. “There’s always a way. There’s always a way, [no matter] how dense you are.”

The legacy she wishes to leave behind has less to do with recognition and more to do with people’s enjoyment of the spaces she created, even after she’s long gone. “I want to create more of this space and when [people] come, they just feel like, ‘Oh, this is such a good park!’ They feel good,” she says. “I think that’s enough because the trees will grow for a hundred years or more.”

*\*Since the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, Kotch has actively supported Thailand’s response to the virus, assisting the public health system’s recalibration of its hospital spaces as well as the preparation of Thailand’s public parks for post-pandemic resilience.*



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# A Dreamer of Widening Horizons

by Stef Juan

**T**here are many factors to consider in determining one's calling.

It could be inherent talent, an aptitude for a certain skill, a passion, an interest, or even economy. For occupational therapist and educator Professor Abelardo Apollo Ilagan David Jr.—“Teacher Archie” to his students at the Independent Living Learning Center (ILLC), Academia Progresiva de Manila (APDM) and the Rehabilitation and Empowerment of Adults and Children with Handicap (REACH) Foundation — early in his life, he found that he had a knack for spotting a need and coming up with creative solutions to address them. When he was a child, he came up with games and activities for his siblings and cousins to keep them productive and happy. For his grandmother who had dementia, he assembled an album of photos arranged chronologically to help her remember.

But what cemented David to his calling is the warm feeling of satisfaction that he gets when he has made people happy. It was the “Awwww” feeling he got when his cousins didn’t want to go home yet because they were having fun with the activities he had made for them, and when his grandmother put his picture to the front of the album he made because she appreciated what he had done for her. We all know this feeling of joy and gratification, oftentimes it is reward enough after working hard worthwhile endeavors.

Little did David know that this happy feeling that he discovered in his childhood would take him to a path where he would eventually help hundreds of children with special needs and their families.

## GOING ALL IN

David wanted to pursue medicine as a profession so he took up Occupational Therapy (OT) at the University of the Philippines Manila for his premed course. However, it didn’t take him too long to decide that he had found what he wanted to do in life already in Occupational Therapy. He didn’t have to pursue medical school anymore.

“As an occupational therapy intern, we had to rotate in different settings,” David shares. “There was stroke rehab, a psychiatric facility, a pediatric clinic for children with developmental conditions, the geriatric population — across the age spectrum and disability groups. This was meant for us not just to be a generalist, but to also find for ourselves where our passions are. I discovered that it’s really kids for me. Kids with developmental conditions — autism, down syndrome, cerebral palsy — those are the people that I wanted to serve.”

After graduation, David accepted a full-time teaching position at the College of Allied Medical Professions (CAMP) at the University of the Philippines - Manila. This position also gave him the opportunity to



take up his Masters degree in Occupational Therapy at the University of Queensland (UQ) in Australia where he also worked as a part-time lecturer. He was given an offer to stay there and work, but he knew he had to come back to the Philippines with everything that he had learned to establish health and therapy programs here. As one of the few Filipino Occupational Therapists with a Masters in OT degree at that time, he helped develop the University of the Philippines' Masters of Rehabilitation Science Program. Ultimately in 2014, he was a lead OT faculty who developed and taught the University of Sto. Tomas' Master of Occupational Therapy Program.

In his mid twenties, his mother sat him down for a Talk. She wanted to ask him what his plans were in becoming financially independent. A professor's pay wasn't that high and she noticed that he took the leftovers in the refrigerator every time he went home to the province on weekends. "She had a point," he concedes. He could have gone abroad or even started his own private practice to earn more money, but David had bigger dreams for his profession.

"One of the most gratifying experiences that I've had in UP as a faculty member was heading the Clinic for Therapy Services (CTS)," David continues. "Usually the clientele there are families from PGH, those who can't really afford private therapy." Eventually, he found that many of the

children were fast outgrowing the programs offered at the clinic.

This realization prompted David to propose a new program for the college. While the college liked his proposal, they didn't have the resources to support it. "But I felt very passionate about it," David shares. "So, I thought: Ok, why not set up the program using whatever resources that I have at that time?"

But even with his financial concerns, David's life savings were just enough to start a small school to put his program to work. "Good thing my family taught me to save all the birthday presents, graduation gifts, Christmas gifts in my bank account," he shares. "I even saved the money I earned from teaching in UP and UQ — by raiding my parents' pantry," he sheepishly adds.

So with the blessing of the Dean of his college, David started Independent Living Learning Center with all the money he had saved. "It gambled — well, I think you don't lose anything when you do what you are passionate about. I guess it was an investment," he says. He turned down offers from other investors, explaining that he wanted to do it on his own first so there would be no pressure from anyone else. The direction and vision would only come from him. He shrugs and adds, "If it doesn't work for whatever reason, I was still young and I could recover."



Archie and other Atlantic Fellows - Manila, 2019

## SMALL BEGINNINGS

At 26, David started ILLC with just four students. He rented a small property along Wack Wack Road in Mandaluyong City for the school. From his initial computations, he needed at least 10 students to meet his overhead expenses, but after an orientation with the families of his first potential students, most of them backed out. "The program was too unconventional for them," he recalls. But because the four families who remained had already deferred their slots in their previous schools and counted on him, David still continued with the school.

"Thankfully, the other parents were just on a wait and see mode," he continues. "They needed a proof of concept first. When they saw that the four had a good experience in the school, enrollment grew exponentially. The four became eight, the eight became 16. We grew until we had to expand and rent the adjacent property."

Two years after ILLC was established in Mandaluyong, David opened a branch in Cebu. After another two years, he opened ILLC Davao.

While ILLC's population grew fast, he couldn't develop the facilities to keep up with their growth because he didn't own the property. David set a goal that in ILLC would have a permanent home in 10 years. Sure enough, in 2013, they acquired a suitable and more spacious property and moved to the school's present location in Mandaluyong.

## REACHING FOR MORE

"When I was starting ILLC, I had so much time in my hands because I only had four students. I felt that I wasn't optimizing myself," David says, introducing his other projects. "Coming from the University of the Philippines, we're taught to be service-oriented, to pay it forward." At around the same time as ILLC, David started a foundation called the Rehabilitation and Empowerment of Adults and Children with Handicap (REACH) Foundation which aimed to establish community-based rehabilitation and education programs in other areas of the Philippines.

So he approached the city government of Mandaluyong to see if he could get a referral from them to start a community based program to help children with special needs. With the City's backing, the foundation tied up with a charitable organization called Hands of Mercy. The organization worked and had a multipurpose place in the middle of an informal settlement in Mandaluyong. At first, he went there by himself to see the children every Friday morning. But the number of children needing therapy grew, to the point that he couldn't accommodate them anymore. So he trained members of Hands of Mercy and some of the mothers in the community to be his assistants.

David taught himself to write grants to fund the project. He won his first grant from a competition organized by the World Bank called "Panibagong Paraan: Building partnerships with the local government." The funding came from the Australian government. "The idea was to set up a community based therapy program using that seed money, but to sustain it, we made sure that the local government would absorb it after we have set it up successfully," he explains. They collaboratively defined "success" with the local government and signed a memorandum of agreement for the city to fund the project when the money from the grant is depleted. "The city kept its word and absorbed the project. Now the community based program called Project Therapy, Education Assimilation of Children with Handicap (TEACH) is fully-funded by the city."

Project TEACH has earned recognition from the Department of Health, Department of Interior and Local Government, National Government and the United Nations as a best practice model. "I feel confident that the program will stay even if ever there will be a change in administration because the government has already seen its impact. Besides, we have lobbied for the signing of ordinances that got Project TEACH recognized by the local government as a fundamental health program," David says. "That's the benefit of getting awards, I think. Those awards we got, those are jewels of the city and the communities we have empowered." People from other local government units

have come to Mandaluyong to study and to replicate the model. They have interns from other countries coming in to study how they empower the community and how the community program was organized. And to learn from how they manage to stretch the resources that they had as well. "REACH Foundation grew because of the local governments who looked into it and implemented the model in different communities," David continues.

More than two thousand kids have set foot in ILLC since 2003, either for therapy, schooling, tutorials, or home programs. But David dared to dream bigger and work harder, for there is still a lot more to be done.

"Five years ago, I asked myself what we still need in the program. We had early intervention therapy services, work placement program for adults, but we didn't have is mainstreamed education," David continues, "Other than giving our differently abled kids the opportunity to be mainstreamed, I thought that if our methods in teaching special kids work, all the more with typically developing kids. We would be able to teach them to be independent, if this is how we demonstrate our patience and creativity, personalized instruction." So he set up a regular school: Academia Progresiva de Manila (APDM).

APDM is a progressive regular school with a focus on inclusion and mainstreaming. Students of APDM who are typically developing have a better attitude towards diversity. They grow up alongside differently-abled students who have autism, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, so it was normalized for them. "They have learned to be more compassionate, respectful, kind," David says proudly. "Sometimes I feel that we go overboard with inclusion and mainstreaming. We give sensitivity training from Day One, as early as preschool. Our teachers are trained to work with kids with special needs because they are included in the classroom. The Department of Education (DepEd) — despite APDM being a new school — has come over to benchmark our inclusion and mainstreaming practices, so I guess our emphasis was just right."

ILLC and APDM have a socialized tuition fee system to allow students who would otherwise be unable to afford to go to a private school would be given a chance to go. But even then, David recognizes that there would still be families who wouldn't be able to afford even their smallest tuition bracket, so he set out to strengthen the public sector to address this need. The REACH Foundation met with the Mayor of Mandaluyong and worked with line agencies, including DepEd and DSWD, to come up with a cost-effective way to provide quality early childhood, special and inclusive education even for the poorest of the poor.

REACH Foundation, through Project TEACH, currently renders about P10,000,000 a year worth of treatments available for free to indigent families in the community. There are volunteer specialists in development pediatrics and rehabilitation sciences who see the value to their own private practice in helping with the community program. Parents are empowered by the training provided to be their children's own therapists at home.

Because there are sectors of society outside the cities that need access to therapy, David co-founded a program called TheraFree alongside with the University of the Philippines College of Allied Medical Professions Alumni Association (UP-CAMPAA) in 2002. It organizes volunteer therapists — originally exclusively from UP CAMPAA, but eventually other therapists from other universities joined as well — and deploys them to remote and rural communities. They conduct screenings to determine the needs of the differently-abled children and adults alike and teach them home programs with the materials written in Filipino. Serving as UP-CAMPAA President in 2016, David reenergized TheraFree by forging a partnership with Unilab Foundation. TheraFree now has over 700 hundred professionals in its roster of volunteers and has 23 partner site provinces nationwide.

David led the creation of TheraCon, a pioneering bi-annual conference organized for and by therapists. Unilab provides the venue for it at the Bayanihan Center and the conference's revenue is used to fund Therafree activities.

Already this is a long body of work for someone who is only 42 years old. But David is only grateful for the opportunities and doors that have opened to him to make all of these possible. "Who am I for Unilab, international funding agencies, the Mayor of Mandaluyong City and other local governments and line agency heads to pay attention to me?" he says at the end of the discussion on the work he is doing now. "They have seen that the concept is solid, viable. The awards help. They open doors." It is a long list of awards, but he shrugs, "At first, I was apprehensive about going for them, do we really need them? But I immediately saw the opportunities that were made available to me when I received the Apolinario Mabini Presidential Award and the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Philippines (TOYM). It's like they looked at me differently and people that I have approached were more receptive and welcoming."

### CONTINUING WORK

He sees his work, and even learning, as far from finished. At present, he has just graduated from the Equity International's Atlantic Fellowship Health Equity program. "It has really broadened my perspective on health," he says. "Not just through the formal modules or training activities being conducted, but also from the interactions that I get from other fellows. Since we're all very passionate about our work, it feeds our motivation and our spirits."

The collaboration among the fellows has enriched David's own work and he feels that the privilege to be a part of this group of people is a blessing that compels him to pay it forward.

At the end of the program, David's project, in partnership with another fellow from Myanmar, is to produce Diversity and Inclusion Modules for Preschool and Late Elementary Students — DIMPLES, for short. Winning a funding grant from the Atlantic Institute and the AusAide, it's an ambitious undertaking but David is excited for it.

"These modules are designed to teach typically developing children in ASEAN countries to be more respectful of diversity and differences, and to be more inclusive. Now, the focus of inclusive education and mainstreaming are teachers — and rightly so. But the important component of a school ecosystem that is being neglected are the classmates. That's where bullying happens," David says. "So this is the objective of the project. We researched on what values that have to be taught, what are the instructional materials that are appropriate for each grade level. We consulted experts, we had focus group discussions, literature review."

David, his partner and his team have developed evidence-based instructional materials such as songs, cartoons, videos, storybooks, arts and crafts projects, storytelling, role playing, and lectures for pre and grade school students. These were piloted in private and public schools in the Philippines and Myanmar. A research on the effectiveness of these modules were presented in the International Developmental Pediatrics Association Congress and was awarded the Perla D. Santos Ocampo Research Award. The aspiration is to have the modules shared to more private and public schools in the Philippines, Myanmar and other ASEAN countries.



1: Archie David in 2017 hosting a visit of the Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity in Southeast Asia

2: Archie at a local government community center in Mandaluyong

3 and 5: Project TEACH includes a skills and livelihood element

4: Project TEACH, fully funded by the city, includes facilities for physical therapy

## A LEGACY OF INCLUSION

When it comes to success in his line of work, one can cite the awards, recognition, and grants given to his initiatives, but David has a different definition for it. “Ultimately, really, success is seeing a more inclusive society,” he replies. “Not just for persons with disability, but also for others who are marginalized because of their faith, their gender orientation, or economic status.”

When talking about his legacy, he admits that he’s still too young to say that he has one. It hasn’t been a conscious effort, he admits. But he hopes that one day, there would be a transition of leadership for all the organizations that he had started. “I don’t want all of these dependent on me, on one personality,” he explains. “I want this to be institutionalized. So when the time comes when I can’t do this anymore, or I’m not available, the programs would outlive me.”

This is why he now happily reports that he could afford to have free time on weekends now. He could take leaves on extended periods, like for when EI sends him somewhere for two weeks. “I don’t have to worry,” he says. “I’m very lucky with my team.”

The goal for the programs to continue without him has been there from the start. This is why he had set up the Davao and Cebu ILLC branches early on. To see if the

programs could be replicated without him. He is also writing manuals to document the processes that have worked for the past 16 years.

In his office in ILLC, there is a stainless metal pitcher on his desk. It’s a memorable pitcher, he says. It tells a story of his student, John, who has cerebral palsy. “In ILLC, we teach our students simple yet effective compensatory methods and we taught him how to put his elbow on the table for stability when holding a pitcher. One day, I saw him hesitating to pour himself a glass of water at a corner in the kitchen. Eventually, he was able to do it without spilling a drop!”

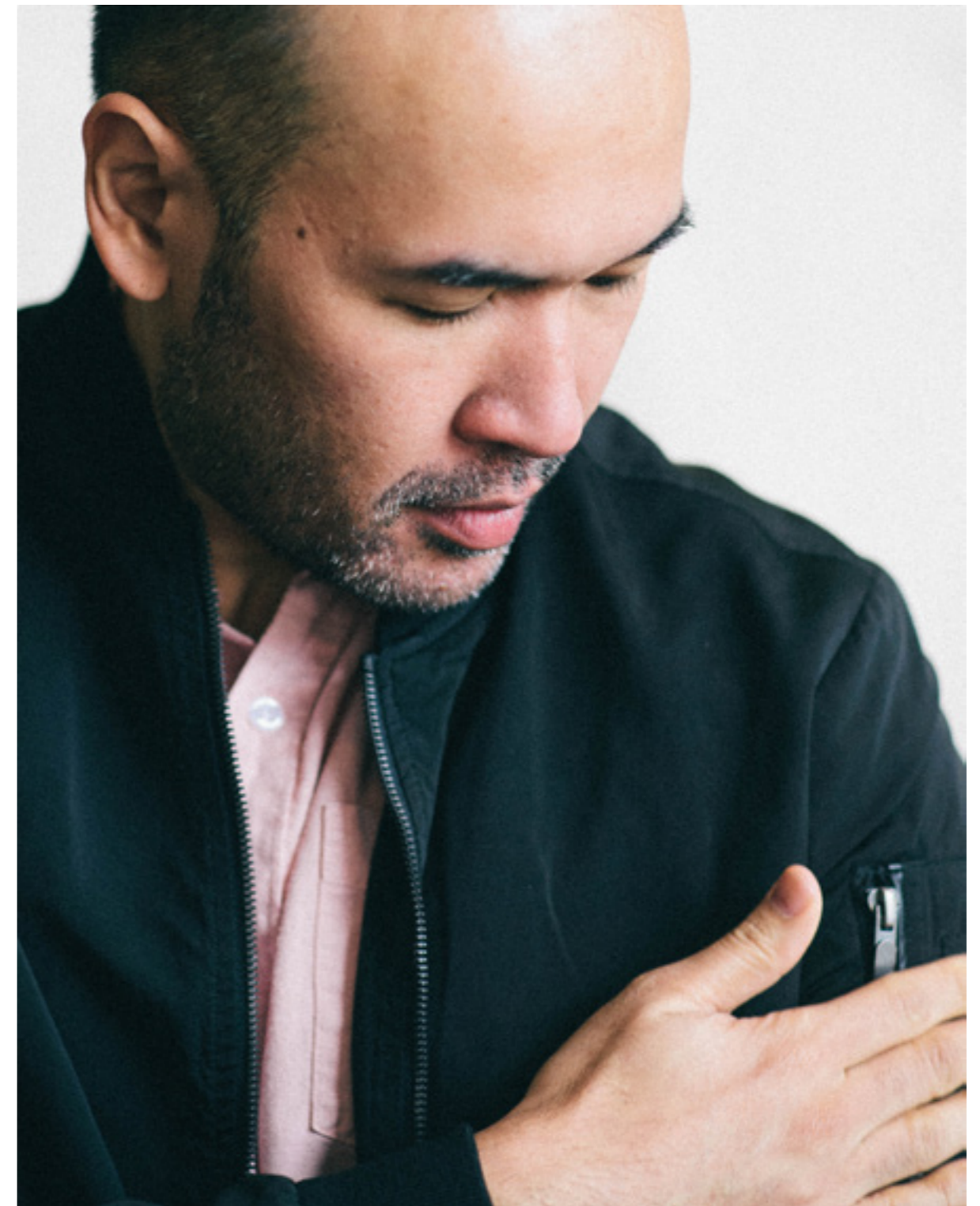
He continues, “I saw on his face that he was looking for someone to celebrate with so I went up to him and confessed that I had seen the whole thing. He stood up and hugged me. He said, ‘I poured water for myself without spilling it!’ From then on, he learned how to button his shirt, tie his own shoe laces. He helped cook scrambled eggs. His mom was so proud! She told me that he even helps around the house now.” David smiles. “It’s those wins. John tells others he learned how to pour water for himself from a pitcher in ILLC. He will carry the story of this place with him.”

He looks at the pitcher on his table again and murmurs, “I guess, that’s a legacy too.”

*Since the COVID19 pandemic, Archie has actively supported the Philippines’ crisis response and recovery. He was invited by the Department of Education to sit as a member of its EducForum, a multi sectoral council that works towards ensuring quality and accessible education for all Filipino children during the period of distance education.*

*In May 2020, he co-founded Occupassion, a global platform that actively helps Filipino and international Occupational Therapists to widen their perspectives and skills as the health care industry shapes its new norms through online continuing learning activities and professional dialogues. Archie served as a speaker for several webinars including How COVID-19 burdened Equity in Education and Health for Special*

*Needs Children, alongside EI Fellow Nila Tanzil, and Risna Utami of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in July 2020. He also served as a speaker and panelist at Naga City’s and HELP Learning Center Foundation Inc.’s Virtual Conference: Persons With Downs Syndrome Transitioning to Adulthood. In November 2020, he was invited to speak at the Philippine Pediatric Society’s Annual Convention on Life Skills Education of Children with Disabilities for Independent Living. Together with the Atlantic Fellows in the Philippines, Archie coordinated community consultations on suicide prevention among children, and collaborated on potential interventions, particularly those applicable in remote local governments.*





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# A Ten-Year Journey

**(2010 – 2020)**

*by Luong The Huy with assistance from Tisha Alvarez*

**S**earching for meaning is the biggest quest in human life. Like leaves fated to photosynthesize, flowers destined to emit scents, or sea waves compelled to rush to the shore then burst into foam, we humans have an inherent longing to understand why we exist in this world and where we drift to.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon of Valentine's Day in the year 2011. I was driving along Nguyen Thai Hoc street on my way home from District 4 after my first working day at ICS, an organization that worked for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Vietnam. On that very day, I started my full-time social activism. I felt like the busy streets before me on that day of love: charged with excitement but mixed with some bewilderment—a hallmark of both my career and my personal life. It seemed apt that one of ICS's early slogans was "born to love," reminding me of our purpose.

I had gotten my bachelor degree in law in the previous year and then worked for a securities company for six months. Although the working environment was comfortable and there was much to learn, I resigned on Christmas day. Am I too young for a steady career path? At that time, I came out to my family and close friends but there was no point in disclosing my sexual orientation in the workplace and in public. I didn't have a close connection with the LGBT community and most of

my few friends in the community were lesbians. One of them talked to me about ICS, a community project that was being developed as an independent organization. I applied and was hired as a project assistant. I told the organization's advisors that I would just dip my toe into social work while waiting for the bar exam, then I would go back to my legal profession.

Ten years later, I'm still here.

## GO WITH THE "CALLING"

In Vietnam years ago, "calling" often referred to patriotic ideals but now it simply means "life goals." Calling is the common theme rocking quarter-life-crisis after we have finished higher education, worked for a few years, and experienced a few successes and failures—looking back at the journey thus far, we grapple with questions about dreams, occupations, and passion.

After becoming aware of life goals comes the time for sacrifice, making the difficult choice to follow our calling. So, "finding our calling" is not limited to simply "finding" but also "fighting" because what happens after we find our calling is more important than the moment it comes to us. Like romantic love, it is not about why a couple falls in love, but about why they choose to stay together. There are numerous ways to fall for someone. We cannot choose who we will meet in life; we can only choose who we will

(not) leave behind. Similarly, we accept a job due to various combined factors. Making our choice work is up to us—there is no blueprint for success and most advice from people whom we perceive to be successful will not be wholly applicable to us.

Working with the LGBT community, I felt like I had found my calling whenever I received thanks from strangers and saw the joy in the young activists' faces after a long day of activities. The simple reason why I stay in this job is because I feel like I'm being helpful here.

## THE COURAGE TO BE OURSELVES

The Vietnamese word “dũng cảm” (courageous) is different from “gan dạ” (fearless). A fearless person leaves their safety, hanging on a cliff edge, but a courageous one pushes their weakness and vulnerability to the edge of challenge. Nelson Mandela once said: “Courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” Courage is still feeling the fear but knowing what is right and continuously endeavoring to achieve it.

In English, “courage” derives from Latin “cour,” which means heart, and “-age” which means “to act.” Thus, the original meaning

of courage is “to act with all your heart.” Mankind for sure has a common view of the connection between courage and the human heart!

I have always thought that only when we take off all our masks can we be ourselves. However, we cannot be ourselves if we feel insecure. Moreover, those of us in the LGBT community face “minority stress” when we come out: we have to be a good gay person (though everyone needs to be good), we have to be a proud one.

In the early 2000s, LGBT people in Vietnam were hidden and only connected anonymously through online forums. Social discourse regarding LGBT people was extremely negative, with the majority of news articles referring to their identity as “unnatural,” “a mental disorder,” “social evil,” “western influence,” or “morally wrong.”

That is the society I grew up in for most of my adolescence. I saw zero support from the education system for LGBT people, read hateful news articles, and saw media depicting LGBT people as criminals. I had no role model. There was no organization working for LGBT rights.

On March 2011, I attended a training course for gay men in South East Asia. That afternoon, our class took a stroll around

Hoan Kiem Lake. It was the first time I openly walked with so many queer people (though fewer than ten). I felt happy and included, knowing that I did not need to hide and that I wasn't going to be judged.

In 2012, the play “Being Yourself” was performed, and I was the MC at the end of it. I thought very quickly of a way to help the audience get the feeling of “being yourself.” I stood on the stage and told stories of LGBT people who had the courage to live as themselves despite sacrifice and loss. I said, “Silence is gold, is diamond, but no more silence for us today. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and ones who are proud to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, please stand up!”

It was one of the most beautiful moments in my life. For the very first time in Vietnam I think, there was an impressive collective coming out. There were people who stood up and burst into tears. There might have been vulnerability but once they were pushed to the edge, their courage thrived. Standing up seems like such a mundane act of standing up, repeated countless times in one's life. But to those who stood up with me that night, it was the rise of the hearts, of the strength within hearts, and it was acting with all of heart—the courage to be oneself.

## MARRIAGE EQUALITY

In 1998, two women in Vinh Long applied for a marriage certificate. At that time, the law did not prohibit it, NOT because it supported marriage equality, but because they could not imagine that possibility. The authorities refused the couple. In 2000, Vietnam adopted the revised Law on Marriage and Family, which explicitly banned same-sex marriage.

On February 2012, a wedding between two women in Dam Doi, Ca Mau was interrupted by officials. The women and their families were summoned and told that what they were doing was wrong. They were also asked to pledge that they would not live together.

There were quite a few press reports over this story then. At the same time, the Draft Law on Marriage and Family was under public consultative period. Vietnamese government announced their plan to revise the 2000 Law on Marriage and Family, as a periodical requirement for any law after more than 10 years of implementation. But the year 2012 was not 1998. The LGBT community was not silent anymore. A group of non-governmental organizations working for LGBT rights in Vietnam created an online social campaign, “I Do,” to call for the support of marriage equality.

We asked people to take a picture of themselves with the message of equal love, equal marriage. A lot of public figures and well-known people supported the “I Do” campaign. Other minority groups like people with disabilities, elder people, street workers, etc. also rose to support LGBT rights. The coalition collected 3,000 signatures and sent the petition to all members of the National Assembly. The Parents of Gay and Lesbian People, PFLAG, stood by their children. We also did a first ever survey and researched on the topic of same-sex marriage and used them for evidence-based advocacy.

With successful and wide-spread social campaigns promoting the universal value of love, social discussions have been getting progressively more positive, with the topics shifting to better reflect the real stories and experiences of LGBT individuals in Viet Nam. The draft law on Marriage and Family added some important regulations to recognize same-sex civil union with some

equal rights as opposite-sex couples.

In a conference on the implementation of the Law on Marriage and Family on April 16th 2013, I sat beside a lady from the legal policy division of the Vietnam Women's Union. When a speaker talking about LGBT human rights stated that “Homosexuals are created by nature,” she blurted out, “How nature!?” Then she explained her comment to the man next to her. I let her finish her chat before telling her, “You know what, I'm gay.”

Then I shared with her why lesbian and gay people need legal recognition. Sometime later in an interview on marriage and family, she mentioned our conversation in the article. However, she kept her viewpoint that the LGBT community should call for social change before advocating to change the law.

In 2013, the Vietnamese National Television, VTV1, asked me to find a representative of the LGBT community to attend a top policy dialogue program of the channel with a key policy maker from the government. I could not find anyone, so finally I decided to be that one. That was the first time I came out about my sexuality to the whole nation. I texted to my father, “Dad, I am on TV,” and turned off my phone. The next morning, I could not feel any change to my life, but the longer time passed, the clearer it was that everything was not like it had been before.

I appeared on the television in a very critical moment when the draft law had been watered down very much. It avoided mentioning protection and recognition of same-sex marriage, but more than legal consequences for the cohabitation of same-sex couples. The campaign lasted until May 2014 when the National Assembly officially passed the law, which no longer prohibited but still did not recognize same-sex marriage. “No prohibition, no recognition” means nothing changed, but nothing was the same. The doors have been unlocked.

Two women in Ca Mau might not know how their story played a unique role and triggered an unprecedented process for the LGBT community in Vietnam. People say do not let the pain become wasteful. Many things have changed because of the people

who overcame challenges of their times.

Looking back at how the laws have changed, I can't help remembering a civic education class in grade when I was younger. We were studying about marriage and family, and our teacher read out loud from the text book: “Marriage between same gender is prohibited.” I gazed at those lines, feeling disappointed and enraged. I later found out that not only did I feel that way in my class then. I hope in my lifetime, that page will have a new answer to the question, “Who of the following are not allowed to marry each other?” so that young people can give an answer from their hearts without the fear of stigma and discrimination.

Every time people try to discourage us by saying that Vietnam is not like other developed countries, who have fought for decades, or even a century, for LGBT rights, I would respond, “I will not be upset if we need 100 years to create a small change, but I will be upset if we spend 10 years, and nothing is moving forward.” Being fast or slow does not matter. What matters is we must start now, and never stop moving forward.

## TRANSGENDER RIGHTS

On August 29th 2012, the first research on Vietnamese transgenders named “Desire to be themselves” was introduced. It was one of the most-attended press conferences I've ever known. The event team had to step out of the room because it was too crowded inside though the venue was the biggest room of the Pullman hotel in Hanoi.

At the press conference, Ngoc Ly, a representative from the transgender community, shared her memory of her school life. In grade 10, Ly was beaten and splashed with water, and her books were torn by her classmates. Ly was not the only survivor. We are all survivors of a gender-prejudiced ideology that creates a fear of diversity and suppresses who we truly are.

Three days before the press conference, a colleague of mine saw Cat Thy, a transgender representative, off at Saigon train station. Being a transgender person, Cat Thy could not travel to Hanoi by plane because of her legal identification. She had to spend two long, tiring days on a train just to say a few



words at the conference, sharing what she experienced every day, from being insulted, being compared with animals to being stared at with disgust.

In a speech at the same conference, Mr. Tran That, the Former Head of the Department of Administration Law, expressed his support for transgender rights and announced for the first time that the Civil Code must be amended. There was an impressive sentence in his speech saying, "Your identity need to be returned" indicating that transgender rights are not newly created but must be recognized by the state.

The day came to an end just and two more long, tiring days on a train awaited Cat Thy for her journey back to Saigon.

On October 5th 2013, the Institute of Legislative Studies under the Standing Committee of the National Assembly organized a conference named "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people: Provision and public views." It attracted quite a few representatives from the LGBT community and PFLAG. This conversation was a milestone in the process of advocacy for LGBT rights in general and trans rights in particular.

About two weeks before, I contacted a transgender woman named Anh Phong and invited her to the conference. She had just come back from Thailand after surgery and was being tended to by her family at her hometown of Quang Ngai. There was also a film crew following her. After learning about Phong's health situation at the time, I afraid that she could not attend, yet she asked me whether the conference was important. I told her it could be "a little bit important" because there were many members of the National Assembly. Phong decided to put aside everything for the time being and went on the long trip to Hanoi to do her part. That day, Phong could barely stand, requesting to be allowed to sit while speaking.

Phong said: "I am quite lucky not being discriminated by my family, my teachers, my friends, and my colleagues. They accept and support me. But there are many people who want to live true to themselves and they are discriminated, isolated and are

even kicked out of their home and abused. For your information, gender affirmation is not keeping up with the Joneses, it's a desperately [sic] desire to be oneself. Surgery extremely hurts but even double the pain will not stop me from trying to be myself."

On June 27th, 2014, for the first time, drag queen artist and trans activist Jessica (Nguyen Huynh To An) attended a conference on trans rights in Hanoi. She has since been a familiar face in dozens of conferences, seminars, dialogues and meetings.

Not once have they received one nickel, not to mention that sometimes they had to deal with unexpected experiences because of their public appearance. Others may ask why they have to keep delivering their message over and over again and may question if their stories are of any help. But after each sharing, there may be more people who would care enough to take some action—they can be from the drafting committee, colleagues of someone in the drafting committee, assistants of members of the National Assembly, or even friends of friends of those people. Nothing is useless.

Right before the last National Assembly session, the government organized a conference in Vinh Phuc province with the attendance of many National Assembly members. The organizers invited two representatives of iSEE, ICS, and two transgender people. Later, they informed us that they could only invite two people and representatives from organizations like us would be preferential. I said that I would give up my slot for a member of the trans community. "It's their journey. Let them continue this journey," I said. Later, I found out that the person from ICS made the same decision. The organizers then decided that all four of us could attend the conference. The key point of policy advocacy is our presence.

On November 24th 2015, the 13th National Assembly passed the Civil Code which recognized transgender rights. This opened up a new chapter in the movement for the rights of transgender people in Vietnam.



## CHOOSING TO STAND WITH MINORITIES

It is hard to determine whether man chooses his fate or fate chooses the man. Only one thing is for sure: Money cannot buy the meaning of life.

The same goes with legal recognition.

Throughout history, there have been many well-known people who belonged to minorities, who used to be discriminated against and treated differently. They devoted their entire lives to obtain the dignity that society refused to give.

While you are on a trail, you know what you must do: pave the way. But you tend to forget your position when you are in a busy intersection or square.

When they were not recognized by the law as equals, minorities began their journey. Driven by the question "why," they looked at the un-recognized part of them and realized that it was beyond any negotiation.

It is often seen that minorities' path to learning the meaning of life also helps the majorities find out more about their own life's meaning. It's said that in essence, the civil rights movement freed white people more than black people. It freed white people from their deeply rooted prejudices and hatred.

That transgender people could live true to their gender frees society from the prejudice

which framed them in rigid gender boxes. That lesbian and gay people could marry anyone they love educates society about the importance of love and the ultimate purpose of marriage, no matter what form the couple takes. In a way, we are all victims of the majority group created by our own. This makes the concept of "liberating the majority group" even clearer.

People often just think of trying to fit the existing mold instead of expanding it. The more we attempt to simplify and unify society, the more problems we create. Only when diversity and difference exist is this life truly simpler and happier for all. Allowing each other's differences is equivalent to giving each other freedom. And the most basic freedom is the freedom to be oneself. If society used the label "normal" less, people would be happier and prouder, simply because no one have to suffer from being "abnormal."

In this fight, we are not fighting against people. The ultimate goal of this process is, surprisingly, not about being able to gain legal rights. We continue to fight against ignorance and the hesitation of people to accept new things. There is not just one way to be happy. There is not just one definition of love, family, or tradition. The advocacy for LGBT equality in Vietnam is not only about liberal values and personal freedom, but also the perfection of family values, social harmony, and the power of love. We are not destroying tradition, but creating it.





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# A Leader of Leaders

by Tisha Alvarez

*This CEO of a management consulting and leadership firm in Vietnam has helped many people chart a more meaningful career path, even as she herself endeavors to find ways to make a greater impact.*

**D**o Thuy Duong remembers a man whom she met as a fellow of the Equity Initiative: “He was almost 90 when we met him at Harvard and he did a lot of great things in his life. When he met us, he said, ‘I’m already the past so you are the future. Learning from the past is important but creating the future is more [important]’” The man proceeded to tell his story, with complete acceptance that his time had already passed. Duong recalls, “The way that he looked at us with a lot of hope encouraged me and put pressure on me at the same time.”

An accomplished woman, Duong has much to be proud of. But at 40, she finds herself at an introspective phase of her life. In keeping with the societal ideals that she held as she was growing up, she envisioned herself “retiring” at 40.

As Asian people, we spent most of our 40 years to meet our family’s expectations and social norms. Until we get mature enough to free ourselves from the “default” life and create a new one and the tough questions come: Who am I? What makes me helpful/meaningful for the rest of my life (it may last 60 years more? What does the future look like?

These are the kinds of questions that Duong asks other professionals as she helps them find more meaning in their work. As the founder and CEO of TalentPool, a consulting firm that provides executive education, and founder of the Women Leaders Network, a social enterprise that supports women leadership in Vietnam, Duong has guided many people as they sought to clarify their purpose and live a life they love. Interestingly, she is now pondering over her own purpose and impact, candidly chalking it up to a mid-life crisis. She found herself free from her own past but reluctant to choose what her future should be.

## A LEADER OF LEADERS

Duong grew up in Vietnam, with a father who was a policeman and a mother who came from a long line of teachers. She was expected to become a teacher herself—"to continue my family's way of helping people to grow"—but saw early on that a teaching career in Vietnam wasn't exactly lucrative. While her grandfather continued to toil as a teacher, her grandmother gave up her career in education to open a small shop, which enabled her to provide for the family. Duong thought that her grandmother's life was far more exciting and saw that being a small businesswoman could be a powerful thing.

She went on to become the top student at one of the most prestigious universities in Vietnam, despite having no real direction. "I just wanted to be rich like my grandmother who could afford a good life for her beloved ones" she says. After graduating, Duong worked for two years, then pursued her master's degree. She was eventually offered a job at the university. "Something inside me woke me up, that I can take this chance to continue the family way to educate people," she says.



But her teaching days brought back a distinct memory from her childhood: Her father had arrested someone who had become a robber despite having a good educational background. "[This memory] came back when I asked my students in the university what they wanted to do after they graduated. No one had an answer. Most of them thought they would follow the money," she says. She realized that it wasn't enough to simply teach students the tools of their trade. Youth need something else to reach their potential and be happy in life. So, she left her job and started her own business, searching for ways to contribute critical change in others' lives.

As a management consultant, Duong was able to have in-depth conversations with the top talent in Vietnam, learning how they developed their competencies, discovering what made them tick, digging deep into the motivators for success apart from money. She realized that she could use this information to help other people to become more successful.





On top of being at the helm of TalentPool and the Women Leaders Network, Duong also became Vice President of the Hanoi Entrepreneur Women Association and even wrote a bestselling book entitled Ba Trieu's 21st Century Daughters. She also currently holds the role of Hanoi's People Councilor, which oversees public health issues such as youth personal growth, business community enhancement, and mental health.

Given her involvement in the healthcare space and an increased interest in equity, Duong joined the Equity Initiative in 2017. The program exposed her to inspiring people from around the world. "They come back to tell their story, to enable, to empower [us] to do these things that need to be done... They provide a lot of tools to facilitate our projects [if we want to do something]. And they give us the freedom to mature."

Looking back, Duong has realized that she hasn't had any real focus in the course of her life. The common thread is that her work has always been informed by her guiding principle: to learn, to love, and to serve. But over the last two years, she has grappled with a pervasive unhappiness over the thought that she isn't making much of a difference. She had been contemplating making big life changes, but has ultimately realized that it's more about a change in her mindset than in other aspects of her life.

*As we were publishing this book, Duong completed her term with the People's Council of Hanoi as a remarkable member who raised up the hope, nurtured trust and encouraged the contributions of her people.*

*She started her writing career as a full time job, searching for the successful stories and lessons from remarkable Vietnamese and conceptualized it into transferable, teachable and learnable things. Her dream is about making every professional worker in Vietnam to achieve wellbeing at work, well-paid and keep growing while doing a meaningful job. It took her 5 years to carve out this vision, and she is on her way to achieving it.*

## EVER FORWARD

Reflecting on where she currently is and whether she has taken up the torch that the old man from Harvard has passed on to her and her peers, Duong says, "You know, my country had an amazing leader, our Uncle Ho. But we also know that it is not easy to have him again even in some other form, so we need to carry his spirit in every single person in Vietnam—put his spirit to other people, into the next generation and keep that spirit." She continues, "Maybe I can report to my Uncle Ho that I tried to carry their spirit, their encouragement and multiply it, spreading it in all people that...I had the chance to speak to, and always to inspire people to be the owner of their life, even small kids. I execute it with my sons at home—I let them be free to fail and come back to be the owner of their life rather than follow me. Maybe that is the answer. I am not so sure."

Being unsure, being confused, having unanswered questions... even the most accomplished person goes through it all. But as Duong shows, it is entirely possible to keep forging ahead—to learn, to love, and to serve—even as you're in the process of self-actualization. Because who has all the answers anyway?



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