

Connecting UniSIM

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UniSIM Alumna Brings Smiles to Student with Autism

In this issue, we spoke to UniSIM alumna, Mrs Jenny Lai, who now heads Eden School, a school specially designed for students with autism. Mrs Lai shared on what drove her to take a one-third hefty pay cut to pursue her dreams.

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WIN!

HIGHLIGHTS

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This issue, we feature alumna Mrs Jenny Lai, Principal of Eden School. She graduated from the Open University UK with a BSc Mathematics with Management in 2004.

Eden School, which was previously known as Singapore Autism School, provides an alternative education option for students with autism. This new moniker reflects a respect for and a valuing of every individual with autism for his/her uniqueness, according to Principal Jenny Lai. Eden School caters to those who require more time in building foundational skills as well as those who are assessed to be more suitable for a vocational route.

Tell us more about yourself. What were you doing before assuming stewardship of Eden School?

After completing my A levels, I worked in the private sector for seven years doing accounting work. Being restless by nature and sometimes quite rebellious, I decided to become a teacher, much against the wishes of my parents. I was drawing a decent salary then and took a hefty one-third pay cut.

My stint in the private sector taught me to value the training I received in the National Institute of Education and to give the best to my work with the students. It has been 22 years since I joined the Education service and I am still enjoying every moment of it.

What motivated you to be involved in teaching children with special needs? How long have you been teaching them?

I was approached by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in December 2007 to take up the challenge of helming a special education school. I was a Vice-Principal in a primary school then. With very little knowledge and no experience in the area, I was quite apprehensive at first.

During my years in the mainstream schools, I had encountered students with learning disabilities, behaviour disorder, autism and dyslexia. Many of the students had difficulties coping with school demands, resulting in low self-esteem, disinterest and sometimes behavioural challenges.

Going into the special education sector would give me a good opportunity to understand how education programmes are customised to engage the students in their learning.

I decided to go in with an open mind and see how I could value-add new perspectives to this field. I joined Eden School as its Principal in February 2008.

What were the interesting stories you had during your first few months with Eden School?

I remember standing at the entrance of the school on my first day at work and greeting every student with a hearty "Good Morning!". My students had no name tags on them then and so I could not address them by name. I received very different responses. Many "ignored" me, some made funny noises, a few flapped their hands or came up to touch me. No one that morning returned my greeting in the manner I had expected.

I still take great pleasure in greeting my students every morning. A few would now look at me for a while and say, "Good morning, Mrs Lai". Some would still shy away.

The difference? I have come to respect every individual for who he or she uniquely is, and to celebrate the steady progress that they made under the caring guidance of their teachers and parents.

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An ode to the noblemen and noblewomen

Many an instance, during my first ten years of formal education, I kept telling myself that I was rather insignificant in school. However, in recent years, I realised that my teachers truly remembered me. There were many instances where I encountered people who were part of my quest for education came up to me and said that I looked familiar. And before I could respond, they will enthusiastically say that I was their student!

These instances were true! Let me relate to you an event that happened about ten years back. As I walked around the heartlands of an area in the Northeast, a familiar lady came up to me and asked me, "How are you getting on?"

My initial reaction was one of shock and when I gathered my wits to respond, it struck me that the lady who approached me was the headmistress of my secondary school that I had attended many years back. Thus, I realised that students do leave a deep impression on their teachers!

To Mrs Irene Sih, Mr King, Mrs Tham, Ms Alice Tan, Ms Karen Chan, Mr Charles Remedios, Ms Brenda Sum, Mrs Sukir, Ms Emily Gan, Dr Lachlan Crawford, Dr Pamela Sharpe, Dr Wee Bee Geok, A/P Kho Ee Moi, A/P Phyllis Chew, Ms Jacqui Watts and to all the teachers who had taught me in one way or another, I would like to extend my deepest and sincerest appreciation for the knowledge you shared with me. Here's an ode to all the teachers in my life:

In my darkness
you brought me light
In my fears
you gave me comfort
In my troubles
you provided me solutions
In my confusion
you showed me options
For all these and your wisdom, I thank you!

Mohammad Noor
Editor (Alumni Volunteer)
Newsletter Editorial Group



Who or what motivates and inspires you?

I believe that deep down in our hearts, every one of us has that inner calling to make a difference in whichever area we are serving. I had never dreamt that I would one day lead a school. My motto since secondary school days had always been, "Do the best you can wherever you are."

Being here at Eden School has been a very humbling experience for me

and I am constantly reminded in my daily interactions with my staff and students of the need to always start by listening and seeing things from my students' perspective; encourage them, and walk this journey of lifelong learning with them.

I am very blessed to be supported in my work by the Special Education Branch in MOE as well as a team of trained professionals from Pathlight School and the Autism Resource Centre. I also have the honour of working with and being mentored by Ms Denise

Phua, Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar Group Representation Constituency and President of the Autism Resource Centre, who is a full-time volunteer and advocate for the special needs sector. We are constantly exploring ways in which we can raise the quality of education programmes for the students we serve and equip them with skills for independent living and / or supported employment.

What do you enjoy doing most in your teaching career?

Interacting with my students keeps me young at heart. I am sure many of my teacher colleagues will agree with me. Over time, as we become more experienced, we learned the art of sensing our students and relating to them as mentors and facilitators, rather than as "knowledge dispensers".

What advice do you have for current teachers or aspiring teachers graduating from UniSIM?

Teaching is all about Heart, Respect and Compassion. When students know that you genuinely care and have their interests at heart, they will reciprocate with respect and a willingness to listen to what you have to share with them. This is what "Touching Hearts, Changing Lives" is all about.

Interview with UniSIM Alumni turned Lecturers

The Newsletter Editorial Group spoke to two alumni who graduated from the then SIM Open University Centre (SIM-OUC) and are currently teaching at UniSIM!

They were previously students like many of you at the then Open University UK (OUUK). Now, both of them teach at UniSIM as Associate Faculty staff. Mr Peter Hung and Mr Goh Boon Yeow are two out of a few other alumni who made teaching at UniSIM part of their careers.

"I studied at the SIM-OUC from 1994 to 1997. When I graduated in 1997 with the degree awarded by the OUUK, I was interested in teaching and was looking for opportunities to join the public education sector or some private schools. However, I realised my qualification and experiences were not adequate. Hence, I took up Masters in Business IT with Curtin University. In 2001, the opportunity came when the SIM-OUC had vacancies for the posts of associate lecturers and tutors and I applied for it immediately," said Peter.

While both of them now "watch" students rushing for deadlines to hand in assignments and projects, they had their fair share of such experience too!

"It was rigorous! But it was time well-spent. I remembered having to complete about six assignments per subject and there was never enough time! On top of that, there were the tough final examinations at the end of the year," said Boon Yeow as he recounted the days when he studied on a part-time basis.

This means that they are able to empathise with students more, having been in their shoes many years ago.

"I understood their challenges and needs. They are independent learners but they also need a lot of motivation to overcome many obstacles, such as juggling career, family and study, in their learning journey. Hence, teaching is not only about sharing knowledge with them but also providing them with help when needed," shared Peter.

In commemorating Teachers' Day, Boon Yeow and Peter would like to take the chance to thank all the teachers who had previously taught them in one way or another. Boon Yeow would like to specially thank Assoc Prof Neelam, Dean of School of Arts and Social Sciences at UniSIM, for inspiring him to pursue teaching as a career.

Now, both of them share one common goal to further their education in hope to obtain a doctorate. Indeed, they are the epitome of lifelong learners!



Mr Goh Boon Yeow
BA English with
Psychology, 2002, OUUK



Mr Peter Hung
BSc Mathematics, 1997,
OUUK
Winner of Individual Category
Lifelong Learners Awards
2005