

# Helping hands across the seas



Melissa Sim

**D**oing good work overseas by starting a non-profit organisation for the needy is no easy task. Someone from Singapore might be unfamiliar with a country's regulations or cultural practices, for example.

LifeStyle speaks to three individuals who have braved illness and hardship and dug into their own coffers to do just this.

✉ [simlinoi@sph.com.sg](mailto:simlinoi@sph.com.sg)

## Heeding the call of Kenya

The call of Kenya, and the desire to help its people, was too strong for Mr Gabriel Teo, 46, to ignore.

After graduating from the National University of Singapore in accountancy, he made his first trip to Kenya simply for a holiday.

Mr Teo, who stayed with a medical missionary group, says: "I realised then, at 23, that the world was a bit greater than my own small world".

He then returned to Singapore and worked as a tax accountant for five years but something beyond the world of figures beckoned, so he packed his bags and headed back to the East African nation.

"I returned in 1995 to see if I could do something to assist in community development. Where and how was something that unfolded slowly over the years," he says.

He is among several kind-hearted Singaporeans or former residents LifeStyle came across who, in an age of materialism and self-centeredness, have taken the road less travelled to start their own non-profit organisations overseas.

Whether it is quitting an accountancy career to support needy students in Africa or moving to far-flung Peru to help low-income youth, they are an inspiration to their friends and colleagues back home.

In Kenya, Mr Teo, a Malaysian who had studied and worked in Singapore for 15 years, started a private trust with his savings, which was used to support one student who had dropped out of secondary school as his parents could not afford his fees.

When his funds were depleted, he started receiving



PHOTO: COURTESY OF GABRIEL TEO

financial support from friends – mostly former classmates – in Singapore.

His work also grew from giving aid to just one student to helping 515 secondary school students complete their education.

In 2007, he registered Tana River Life Foundation in Kenya as a non-profit organisation to "formalise the set up" and provide accountability to his donors.

Besides building schools, libraries and providing bursaries, the foundation also promotes sustainable agriculture and supports youth by having them manage small-income projects to develop character and confidence.

Mr Teo says that beside donating money, friends

and family in Singapore and Malaysia have been very supportive – organising bake drives and sourcing furniture for schools in Kenya and books for the libraries.

A private charitable trust also funds the foundation's administrative budget; there are eight administrative staff including Mr Teo.

"People are open to helping outside their communities and that is why we have been able to do more each year," says Mr Teo, who leads a simple life there.

He lives in a house which is shared by youth and members of staff.

He draws a monthly salary of just \$179 before deductions for hospital insurance and social security and has home-cooked meals which work out to about 90 cents a day.

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MR GABRIEL TEO (left) on the non-profit organisation Tana River Life Foundation, which he founded in Kenya

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In his 16 years there, he was seriously ill three times. The first two times, he was hit with malaria and the third was a nose infection.

"When you get malaria for the first time, it seems like you are going to die, but the body builds up immunity and attacks become less severe over time if you start medication immediately after you are diagnosed," he says.

But Mr Teo, who is single, does not see his move to Kenya as a sacrifice.

"I do believe we are all free to choose and I know that I am following what is in my heart.

"The discovery of who I am and the path I am being called to live is a daily experience," he adds.