

Life takes a turn in Kenya

Accountant Zhang Jian Zhong (Gabriel Teo)'s 22 years in Kenya helping the poor

Gabriel's career and future was bright, joining a top-notch accounting firm after his graduation. However, a trip to Kenya made him "walk away" from his potential glistening career, giving up a high salary and comfortable lifestyle in Singapore, and went to Kenya alone, pledging to help the poor there.

That "walk out", was 22 years ago.

Once a upon a time, his definition of success was to make a lot of money and have a comfortable lifestyle.

Now, his definition of success is to have the ability to improve on the lives of other people.

On a hot afternoon, I met Gabriel at a church's kindergarten in Hougang. When I found him, he was sorting out donated items in a tent piled with old clothes.

Gabriel, 52, moved to Kenya in 1995, spending the last 22 years there. Every year, when he returned to Singapore and Malaysia for a visit, other than to visit relatives and friends, he will also collect donations of used items and shipped them back to Kenya, letting the villagers sell them and earn some extra income.

Examination did not teach me to know who I am

Gabriel brought me to an aircon room to do the interview.

When we sat down, he said, almost shyly: "I am not good at talking, so why don't you ask questions. You ask, I reply. "At the end, we spoke for more than three hours, about his views on life; his work in Africa; his philosophy on education. He spoke a lot, and very much in detail. It feels as if he is not talking, but "sharing". He loves to share, because he is happy with what he is doing.

Gabriel was born in Meleka. At age 15, he was awarded the ASEAN scholarship and came to study in Singapore. He graduated from Raffles Institute, Hwa Chong Junior College and NUS Accountancy Faculty. After he graduated, auditing firm Arthur Andersen has a job waiting for him, his future was bright.

Before he started work, Gabriel wanted to take a trip, so he went to Europe, and from Europe he flew to Kenya to visit his brother who was on a church mission trip there. Gabriel volunteered as a photographer and followed the church's medical team. What he saw with his eyes and through the camera lenses, gave him a complete different take about life.

He recalled: "water was such a major issue for the villagers; there was no clinic, so the medical team treated patients under a tree. I was 21 years old then, but only then I found that I have so many questions about life."

Before he went to Kenya, he has set a life goal for himself: work a few years in the accounting firm, become a partner in the firm, make a lot of money. It's that simple. After he came back from Kenya, he threw away this life goal, for he suddenly realised, he has not really lived life.

He said: "I have never given myself a chance to really experience living life. My life journey has not started, and yet I am already mapping out my life plans. Am I really able to judge what is right or wrong, and make the right choice? Do I really have my own values, or am I just following the flow? There are still so many things in life that I do not know about, should I go explore these unknown, or should I be satisfied with what I have now?"

A whole lot of question mark that disrupted his life goals

He said: "In the past, I was 100% sure that I will succeed. My whole life was based on this belief. Since primary one, my results were always in the top three, my life has been smooth flowing and comfortable. I pursue "being on top", but I come to realise that "being on top" is not the most important. Examination did not teach me to know who I am, it did not push me not to be afraid of the uncertainties in life. It turns out that I can take a risk, and take a step out based on my beliefs. Since life opened a window for me, I should go explore the world outside of that window."

At that time, Gabriel's father was a civil servant, mother was a receptionist, although they were not well to do, but they were living comfortably. After coming back from Kenya, Gabriel must fulfil the bond for his scholarship and work in the accounting firm for 5 years. He wanted to go to Kenya immediately, so he asked his father to help pay for the penalty for breaking the bond, his father turned him down.

"My father said, I should apply what I have been trained for, only then I can decide. I think my father was right, I was also worried I was young and made reckless decision."

Why is there a gap in my life?

In that five years, Gabriel was promoted to assistant tax manager, with a high pay, lot's of friends, rented a four-room flat, and even bought a car. But at the fifth year, he asked himself: "I really can't complain about my life now, but why do I always feel that there is a gap in my life?"

He thinks that it was his heart that was guiding him: there is some other things awaiting him in a land far away. So, he handed in his letter of resignation. He laughed as he recalled: "Friends were saying, are you crazy? My father couldn't understand what I was doing, only my mom was not surprised. She was cooking when I told her my decision, without even looking up she replied calmly, I knew you will go back to Kenya."

That was 1995, Gabriel was 30 years old then, and he landed in Kenya filled with enthusiasm. But little does he know he was to be hit with another blow.

Gabriel landed in a town called Garissa in the north-east region of Kenya. His only skill was IT. So, he spend a year in the Cardinal's office, helping to sort out data and documents, but what he really wanted to do is to do somethings for the villagers.

He said: "I realised that I know nothing about the local culture and issues. I thought that I can immediately help solve the problems for the locals the moment I reached there, at the end, I learnt a valuable lesson about being "humble". I must start learning from zero, I must start to know myself, I must find out how I can contribute. My journey has just started, and in this journey, the first person to benefit is myself."

Not long after he arrived in Kenya, he received news that his father was stricken with cancer. Gabriel went back to their family home in Johor Bahru to look after his father. He only returned to Kenya after his father's condition stabilised. During the six months, his father finally accepted his choice, and told him: "You have made a right choice." Gabriel's father has since passed away, but he is glad that his father told him that.

In 1997, Gabriel went back to Kenya but encountered heavy flood when he arrived. The roads to Garissa were washed away and he could not return to Garissa. He temporarily stayed in the Idsowe Village at the Tana River Delta, not realising that that temporary stay lasted till now.

Setting up a foundation, improving the education environment

Gabriel stayed at a student's home, and soon got used to the lifestyle in the village, and within a year he learned the local Kiswahili language. He believes that when there is a need, he will have pushed himself to do it, and self-learning it from daily life. "If I don't learn the Kiswahili language, I will not be able to converse with them, and even my daily lives are greatly inconvenient. For example, the villagers emphasize on respecting the elders, if I want a drink of water, I cannot go get it for myself, I must let the children in the house get it for me. But if I cannot even say "I want a drink", what can I do? I felt very useless, can't even speak their language, how can I even do something for them?"

While staying with the local family, he realised that one secondary four kid was always at home and not going to school, when he asked, he was told that the family can't afford the school fees, so the kid was sent home. Gabriel opened his eyes wide and said to me: "Only then I know that you can't go to school without paying school fees! Before that I have never had to worry about school fees!"

He decided to sponsor this kid. Through this incident, it prompted him to dive deep into understanding the local education system. He visited schools, realising that the schools lacked many basic facilities, such as tables, chairs and books. He took out his savings, looked for friends to sponsor, to provide facilities for schools. He also sponsored more children, to let them go to school.

Village children can also have a good education

In Kenya, primary school education is compulsory and free. However, for secondary school, many of the schools are far away from the villages. So, the students must stay in the hostels. The school fees and hostel fees come up to about \$500 per year. For a farming family whose household income is about \$50 a month, this is a real burden.

In the village, next to Idsowe, there is a principal who wanted to help more students to continue schooling, as he is also worried that the kids roaming the streets will pose a danger, so he decided to set up a public school that is less expensive. Gabriel feels that this is a very meaningful project, so he joins forces with this principal to set up Garsen Secondary School. Other than the usual basic facilities, Garsen Secondary School has its own science laboratory and library. Gabriel even bought a school bus. He explained: "With the school bus, we can fetch kids from different villages, so that they need not stay in the hostels and thus save a lot of money. "

Garsen Secondary's school fees is \$350 per year. This is the cheapest in the whole of Tana River Delta. When the school first started in 2004, there were only 16 students. Gabriel helped to fund their school fees, but he emphasized: "I don't fund them fully, only partial, because I believe that when it comes to

education, parents have a responsibility too.” Garsen Secondary now has 800 students, it is the largest public school in Tana River Delta.

The children need education, so do the parents. Gabriel pointed out: “The parents in the villages don’t understand the importance of education. As long as their child is in school, they do not care about the quality of the education or their child’s results. But now, the parent’s attitude has changed, they will tell me, their child has passed or failed in which subject, and they have started to care more about their children’s education.”

Gabriel started the Tana River Life Fund in year 2005, to help Garsen Secondary to grow. In 2013, the fund started to help 11 other schools in Tana River Delta to improve on its teaching environment, including setting up libraries, providing text books and providing help for school fees.

Gabriel said: “Why should the children from the villages be subjected to second class education? We want to provide the children with quality yet affordable education. I always believe that these children are smart, as long as you provide them with good education, they will shine.” He does not get involved in the teaching per se, believing that he should leave the teaching roles to teachers. His role is to provide guidance to the children, as well as coming up with ideas to improve on their education.

In year 2011, Tana River Life Foundation started a Delta Mustard Seed Academy, providing pre-primary and primary education, with the aim of providing a good education foundation for the children. Gabriel proudly said: “The kids learn phonics, by six years old they are able to read a full paragraph. Once, at the kindergarten graduation ceremony, the school asked me to write a graduation speech. I thought it will be read by a teacher, instead, it was read out by a little girl. She has read out a speech written for an adult. The kids now can speak three languages, English, Kiswahili and their mother tongue.”

Delta Mustard Seed Academy was operating in a temporary building. This year January, they finally have their own school building, and currently has 280 students.

Inculcate the definition of success to the children

Tana River Life Foundation also implemented the Youth Development Project, Agriculture Project and the Women Secondary Income Scheme.

Gabriel puts a lot of emphasis on the character development of a person. In the Youth Development Project, apart from developing their talent, he also teaches the youth the definition of success. He said: I told the kids, when you say you are successful, it is not when you have a job in the city and have a car and yet your mother is starving in the village. When you can improve the livelihood of your family and your community, then that is called success, that is called development.”

Now, there are 23 youth benefitting from the Youth Development Project. Tana River Life Foundation sponsors their university school fees, and in return they must serve the community as a volunteer for two years. These youths learned about managing the school canteen, school bus services, library etc. They also do simple admin and accounting work. Gabriel explained: “The two years of service does the youth a lot of good, if we sent them directly from the village to the city to attend university, they may get lost or distracted, but this two years serving the community taught them independence, and they become more mature.”

Tana River Delta's villagers are mainly farmers. They used to only plant mangoes and corn. Now they have learnt to plant other crops, setting up bee farm, fishery, and they also rear chicken and ducks. The Agriculture Project not only help the villagers to eat better, earn more money. More importantly, it helps to improve the children's nourishment. With better nourishment, the children will be in a better shape to focus on school.

Apart from that, all the old clothes, bags etc that Gabriel collected through the collection drive and shipped back to Kenya, were given to the women folks to sell. The money earned is then used to help pay for the children's school fees.

From general duties to admin work, monthly pay \$240

Tana River Life Foundation does not openly seek for donation. Gabriel rely on word of mouth among friends and the social media to do his promotion, as well as the contacts he has built up over the years to get donations. Many of his donors are his ex-colleagues from the accounting firm. Gabriel said with gratitude that life will always have some beautiful coincidence.

About 10 years ago, when he used up all his savings, and was back at his parent's place, he was worried how was he going to continue his work in Kenya. Just then, his batch of ASEAN scholars whom he has not met up for ten over years arranged for a gathering. After listening to him sharing the work he does in Kenya, they all chip in with funds to support. Gabriel said: "I don't do fund raising events. I just share with people our plans and vision. If they think it is worth supporting, they will support."

Gabriel's mother also supported him in her own way. She knows his education development project is a long-term project, so she never pressed him about when he is coming home. His mother also made a trip to Kenya to visit him. Every year when he comes back to Singapore and Malaysia, he will spend two months in Singapore to settle the collection of old clothes and other donation matters, after which he will spend one month to spend time in Johor Bahru with his mother.

Some of the students sponsored by Tana River Life Foundation goes to universities in Malaysia. During their school holidays, they will stay with Gabriel's mother, who will be their guardian. This is an arrangement that gives Gabriel a lot of comfort.

"My home" has more than 20 residents

In Kenya, Gabriel and the youths from the Youth Development Project live in the same house. It has 6 rooms and housed more than 20 people. When asked about his dwelling environment, he said: "No water heater, so we have to boil water. In the past, we don't have electricity and running water, so we have to draw water from the river, and used kerosene lamp. Now we have electricity and running water, so that's a big improvement over the last 22 years. That is my home." As he said that, he is full of pride, even though it is nothing compared to his living environment when he was living in Singapore, it is obvious he is very contented with his home there.

When asked about his day in Kenya, "I am very busy every day. I have to map out the plans for the Youth Development Project, deal with the daily issues of the school, even on Saturdays I have to sort out accounts and admin matters," he said with a smile, obviously he is not bothered by all the tiredness.

How much does he make? He took out his phone and calculated: "My monthly salary is \$240." The local primary school teachers made \$380 per month, so he makes less than a teacher, and that is way below the four-figure pay he used to make, but he said with a smile: "I have very little expenses."

Did he miss his time at the accounting firm?

"Not at all. For all that I have experience, I now feel fulfilling and satisfied. No matter how tired I am, I sleep very well at night, and the next day I always start the day fully recharged, never feeling drained. I am very fortunate to have a life like this, and I am thankful that back then I could look further ahead."

For someone who has self-doubt about his choices and his values at the age of 21, he has grown to be a person who is so sure and confident about his life and his work.

He said: "I like to do things that is fair and right for everyone. I don't like to do things superficially. Your feelings have to be true, I do not help for the sake of helping, I must believe in the project, work and walk with the villagers, the journey is most important. I am not just asking for your donation, but I want to share the meaning and value of life."

When Gabriel said these words, his voice was firm, and his eyes glowed, and I seem to be looking at a 30 years old who is carrying his passion and beliefs to Kenya. It's been 22 years, but his passion never fades, that's really something.

Many of Gabriel's friends were also influenced by him. On the day of the interview, Mary (56) who knew Gabriel for 12 years, was helping to sort out the old clothing. She comes to help out every year.

Mary said: "Gabriel inspired me. Competition in Singapore is so intense, he is so well educated, he could have chosen to have a comfortable life, but he didn't. I hope to be like him, to help others, extending a helping hand to friends in need, and walk with them through difficulty, that is what matters."

Be Grandpa in ten years' time

Gabriel brought along three youths under the scheme along this trip, letting them interact with some schools and the students here, and also to help packing and sorting donated items at the kindergarten. Gabriel said: "I want to widen their horizon, and let them understand why others are willing to support them."

One of the youth, Gideon Maume Sibbo (22) told me, after his O levels, his parents has no means to send him to university as he has two younger siblings studying in secondary four and secondary one. But he got the sponsorship from Tana River Life Foundation, so he finally could continue his studies. He said: "I am very happy, Gabriel is very important to me. He is my teacher/mentor."

Under the Youth Development Project, Gideon learn how to use the computer, learn how to cook and many other life skills, and he is also more cheerful. He said: "I used to be very shy, I am afraid to talk to people. Not anymore. Yesterday I shared with some Singapore schools about our school life. I have more confidence now. I came from a obscure village, and I used to feel I am nothing, but now, I feel that I can do something."

Gabriel said, when he first came to Kenya, he suddenly realised that he himself is the first beneficiary of this life long journey. Over the past 22 years, he has helped many children and parents, but he never felt that he is great. He remembered the clueless youth he was, and he laughed at himself: "I thought back then I was going to save the world, actually I was saving myself; I didn't give others anything, but I gave something to myself first."

For the past 22 years, he often asked himself: what I am doing now, is it a right thing to do? And every time the answer is a: YES.

Talking about the future, he said that a lot of the things he is doing now, in ten years' time the local youths will be able to handle, so he need to start other projects. He also thinks that by then, he would probably have more time on hand, and hope to read a book every day, or learn a new language.

Although he is single, he laughed and said: "All the kids are my kids, so ten years later, I will be grandpa."

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Translated by Milo