Youth with a mission

Beyond just getting good grades, some young people here manage to find time for sports, community work and social causes

Corrie Tan

Singapore youth have sometimes been lambasted for having it easy compared to their elders and lacking the compassion to see beyond a world of grades to the wider community.

When speaking to student leaders from Hwa Chong Institution in October last year, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said: “Most people in Singapore are happy to be competent, above average rather than exceptional.”

He added: “We shouldn’t be afraid of being different and wanting to make a difference.”

Lifestyle asked around and found three students who have seized the day, who score good grades, follow their hearts and do extraordinary things in the community, without banging a drum about it, either.

They are Singapore’s “superhero” undergraduates, hailing from the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU).

Lifestyle spoke to one student from each school to ask them about what they do and why they do it.

NUS geography student Heather Chi, 22, once struggled with anorexia. Now, under the umbrella of the collective Food For All, she helps match food distributors with community food programmes, among a host of other activities related to food and social causes.

She says: “For me, the underlying motivating factor has really been to have meaningful fun. If you’re doing volunteer work you don’t enjoy, it’s really hard to keep up the motivation.”

However, to cram so much into their lives, some “superheroes” clock only four to five hours of sleep each night.

Associate Professor Daniel Fung, 44, who is the senior consultant and chief of the department of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health, says: “If this is someone who can sustain this high level of energy and who has always been like that since they were young, it might just be their way of functioning.”

“Each of us has a different way of functioning and not all of us are like that.”

He advocates space to rest and rejuvenate to avoid falling ill, but says: “If a person is balanced and able to manage, and they’re not stressed and can maintain their lifestyle without external stimulants, then by all means.”

Twenty-four-year-old SMU student Benjamin Loh is one of these exceptional students. He coaches professionals in business and relationships – on a voluntary basis – runs a Toastmasters’ club and organises activities for charity. He says: “At times, I do feel burnt out but I try and catch up on my sleep debt over the weekends.”

The parents of these high-functioning individuals do have reservations about the punishing workload.

For instance, Ms Chi runs a website that links food distributors with community food programmes here, so she receives calls from those who want to contribute.

She says: “My parents are always concerned about news reports such as these, because they lead to more people contacting me.”

But in the end, the parents have nothing but praise and support for the young dynamo.

Sales engineer Jeffrey Choo, 55, is the father of national sailor Jovina Choo, a student who runs her own company, Dream+, which manages student athletes and gets them involved in social work.

Mr Choo says: “I trust Jovina, so I leave it to her to do stuff on her own. She can manage her own time well.”

Associate Professor Low Aik Meng, 63, dean of students at SMU, said of the high-achieving, community-oriented students whom he has encountered: “These are the type of students we want. People who excel at a high level and are still so humble.”

SAILING COACH, CO-OWNER OF AN ATHLETE MANAGEMENT FIRM

JOVINA CHOO, 21, second-year student in Sport Science and Management at Nanyang Technological University

She clinched a silver medal in sailing at the South-East Asian Games in 2007, but despite the fame, that was not a high-tide mark for this quiet achiever. What floats her boat is much more than that.

Beyond her training regime, Ms Choo also mentors and coaches those who are her juniors, as a part-time sailing coach at the Republic of Singapore Yacht Club.

Once a week, for three hours each time, she trains students from Kent Ridge Secondary School in the sport – for competitions as well as to obtain various levels of certification in sailing. The money she makes from coaching is also a way to pay for her school fees.

She says: “I trained them right from the beginning, when they knew nothing about sailing. So it’s really great to see them control their own boats and enjoy themselves.”

Ms Choo, who has been sailing since she was 10, still manages to juggle her school work with the sport. She is taking an additional module at school last semester to make up for one she dropped in 2009 because of a sailing competition.

She declined to comment on her grades at university or give her GPA, but her father reveals that she had been a top student for three years in a row at the Singapore Sports School.

In 2009, she set up Dream+ with four of her friends, all of whom have represented Singapore in the sports arena, from sailing to track and field.

The company started out as a way for national youth athletes in Singapore to look for sponsors as well as to give back to society by getting involved in social work. Its membership has grown to more than 30 youth who are involved in sports, including those who are national and regional champions, such as Ms Choo.

Now, Dream+ also provides mentoring programmes and seminars based on the athletes’ sporting experiences. They are working with self-help group Mendaki on a youth mentoring gig.

Ms Choo’s team teaches primary school children about character, competence, confidence, connectedness and contribution to society through games and activities. They also assist the children with schoolwork and they have a session once a fortnight.

She said of her busy schedule: “It’s important to have a balance, especially when I just need to relax. There are days when I just don’t sleep enough, so my recuperating day is usually Sunday when I allow myself to sleep in.”

At university, she is the vice-president of the NTU Yachting Club, where she organises and plans events for the student body and members of the club. She is also setting up an NTU keelboat racing team.

In addition, she is vice-chairman of the committee organising the E.W. Barker Challenge, an NTU event that consists of a running race and a scholarship presentation.

As she lives in a university hostel, she usually gets to see her parents only on weekends. Her family lives in an HDB flat in Woodlands.

She has two older brothers, one about to start his national service and the other working in sales.

Her father is a sales engineer and her mother is a dealer at one of the casinos here.

She says: “I’ve always been very independent and my parents give me a lot of freedom.”