

AT A GLANCE

PASTIME ACTIVITY

"I play the piano and my kids play the violin, so sometimes we have duets or quartets together."

PAST AMBITIONS

"I used to want to be a pianist, an artist and even a teacher at one point."

WHAT I

STAND FOR

"My family and CARIF define a large part of my life but it will always be my family that comes first and foremost."

Altering Perspectives

A SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR MANY, HEAD OF THE CANCER RESEARCH INITIATIVES FOUNDATION **PROFESSOR DR TEO SOO-HWANG** STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMYSTIFYING THE ISSUE OF CANCER

MANY SEE CANCER AS a death sentence. The word stops people in their tracks and they think of the worst possible outcome. However with technology these days, the possibilities of actually having the worst outcome can be reduced, says Professor Dr Teo Soo-Hwang, a woman who shines like a candle in the dark for many breast cancer patients and survivors.

"We haven't caught up to that fact yet and it is really frustrating," exclaims the vibrant woman who believes one of the problems surrounding the issue of cancer in the Malaysian society is the fact that we just prefer to not talk about it. "We have to take charge and talk about it if we want a change because right now, if you look at Malaysia and other parts of Asia, more than half of the breast cancer patients are under the age of 50," says the professor.

Now a successful scientist who is well-known in the cancer research field, Teo humbly believes that everything she has achieved thus far, is by luck. "I have always been very lucky to be at the right place with the right individuals to guide me."

"Both my parents didn't receive university degrees, having studied up until Form 3 in secondary school," she continues. "And so when you have one older brother and three younger sisters, growing up we kind of knew that we would need to rely on scholarships for higher education."

Now a 43-year-old with a family of her own, this dedicated lady has been through a string of scholarships since the age of 13 and is grateful for the fact that they were offered to her. "First it was the ASEAN Scholarship in Singapore and then one from Yayasan Sime Darby to get a degree in Cambridge University as a scientist," she says. "I surprisingly did very well and was fortunate enough that the university then offered me a scholarship to do my PhD in which I decided

that I wanted to do cancer research." Being as smart as she is, she was then offered a job where she worked as a Royal Society Research Fellow at the university. It was when Tan Sri Tunku Ahmad Yahya, the CEO of Sime Darby Berhad called on her to lead the Cancer Research Initiatives Foundation (CARIF) as CEO that she decided to return back to her homeland. Teo has been with CARIF since its inception a decade ago.

The foundation is recognised internationally for its laboratory-based research in order to identify why cancer happens and how to prevent and treat it.

She goes on to say in a very matter-of-fact tone, "But no matter how much we do, people have to realise that we can't cure cancer just yet. If you ask if cancer can be cured in 10 years, it would be a straightforward *no*. We do try our best to develop new drugs and vaccination methods and that is where we spend most of our money. High-class works like these take time and when we're talking about developing new drugs, it actually takes an average of maybe 25 years."

Something she holds dearly in her heart, is a spoken hope conveyed to her by a breast cancer patient, "There are many patients who inspire me. One of them now talks to other patients in hopes of encouraging them on their journey of survival. But more importantly and as a reminder to me, she told me that her one wish was that her daughter would not need to go through what she went through. That is a very gripping reminder that what we do here is very real and that we need to try our best to do more."

With someone like Teo, you know you won't get anything less. "If you ask the people within this organisation, they would probably say that I identify with individuals like the late Margaret Thatcher. I really am very focused on achieving a goal. I have always tried to be positive and to try my best to make things happen," she concludes. **■**

WORDS DEMIE TAN PHOTOGRAPHY NICHOLAS YONG STYLING AND GROOMING AZZA ARIE

