

IT is lunch time and a steady stream of well-heeled executives from the shiny office towers nearby traipse into a restaurant. After they've placed their orders, they sink into nearby chairs and bury themselves in their electronic gadgets to while away the time. At one point, an old man using a walking stick steps in. He looks around for an empty seat. For a while, no one looks up or even offers him a place to sit. Fortunately, one person offers an empty seat at his table. The old man accepts the offer and is grateful for the company.

Observing this, it brings to mind what Laurence Lien once said: "A successful society is not just one that is economically successful but also one that has a healthy civil society."

Is it possible that the executives above have so lost their sense of civility that they can't see what's in front of them? Then again, what exactly do the words "healthy civil society" mean?

A 45-year-old father of three young boys, Lien explains that in a civil society, citizens must feel that they are part of it. He adds: "There must be a sense that you are a part of a community. People must have a sense of responsibility that they can do something about a situation. Otherwise, it is a fatalistic situation."

As the chairman of Lien Foundation of Singapore, this suave gentleman was recently in town as the keynote speaker at a fundraising event organised by Hospice Malaysia. Palliative care is, after all, one



CIVILITY AND SUCCESS

Philanthropy plays a huge part in promoting a civil society, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

of the three areas the foundation focuses its attention on.

The aim of the event was to celebrate the strength of familial bonds and how those affected with a life-limiting illness should not have to go through that journey alone.

COMMITMENT TO SERVE

This cause is close to Lien's heart and he speaks of his grandfather, Lien Ying Chow, who lived well into his nineties. In fact, Lien's face lights up when he shares a story about how he had to accompany his grandfather to an event at Shangri La Hotel in Singapore.

"I was about 25 years old. My job was to keep an eye on him and look after him. But my grandfather was so busy saying hello to everyone. He was the consummate networker." Shaking his head, Lien adds: "I lost him."

Indeed, the Lien Foundation was started by Ying Chow in 1980 to help the needy and deprived in society. Long before this though, Ying Chow had founded the Overseas United Bank (OUB), and became one of Singapore's

banking tycoons and philanthropists.

In spite of being so successful, he made it clear that his children and grandchildren shouldn't expect to be entitled to a job or just walk into one. In fact, working for the family of ten meant being judged more harshly in comparison with outsiders.

This didn't come into play so much for Lien because by the time OUB was acquired by the United Overseas Bank (UOB) in 2001, he was already carving his own career path. Even when he was barely 19, he'd decided that he wasn't going to join the family business. Instead, Lien set his mind on doing something that would make a difference to people. He shares: "I made a commitment to serve the government."

CIRCLE OF PHILANTHROPISTS

Having won a scholarship from the government of Singapore, he went to Oxford University to complete a bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Upon his return to the island nation, Lien began his career in the civil service and worked in various



Lien is driven by the need to make a difference.

PICTURE BY SHIRAZ ALI

ministries, including Education, Home Affairs, Community Development and Finance.

In 2008, when Lien turned 38, he decided to leave the government and work for a non-profit entity called the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC). In time, he became the chairman of the Lien Foundation and his latest venture is called Asia Philanthropy Circle. The idea of this circle is to get philanthropists in Asia to come together to learn from each other, share their ideas and cultivate joint exchange.

There is a snag, however. 'Civil society' and 'non-profit' tend to be seen as concepts that don't support the state or give the services to the state. "Non-governmental" can be read as 'anti-government'.

MINI FOUNDATIONS

Even though there are inherent obstacles in what he's doing, Lien still perseveres. One success story is where the donor started out by visiting some chronically sick people in Singapore. He came face to face with the appalling conditions they were living in. Many of these old people lived in one-bedroom flats and were in need of urgent medical attention. However, they didn't have the financial or physical means to seek help. What this donor did was to get in touch with Lien and his foundation, and they set about helping this donor set up a mobile clinic.

There is an added complication in this case. As Lien explains: "There are no elderly ghettos in Singapore. The chronically sick are in all parts of the island."

In a place like Denmark, however, there is a greater concentration of such people. So, the mobile clinic goes to one place and nursing care is given to a number of people during this time. In Singapore, a lot of time is spent travelling from one patient to another. Also, the nurses end up providing counselling as well because these senior folk crave company. All this becomes a drain on resources.

From a wider perspective, perhaps, Lien's initiatives can be summed up as "Donors setting up donor-advised funds".

As he says: "Donors make a gift and we create an account for them. It's like a mini foundation and we advise them accordingly."

By using words like bank, fund and donors, and saying that he's trying to create a "bank of philanthropists", it is possible that Lien has come a full circle. After all, what he does appears similar to what his grandfather set out to achieve all those years ago.