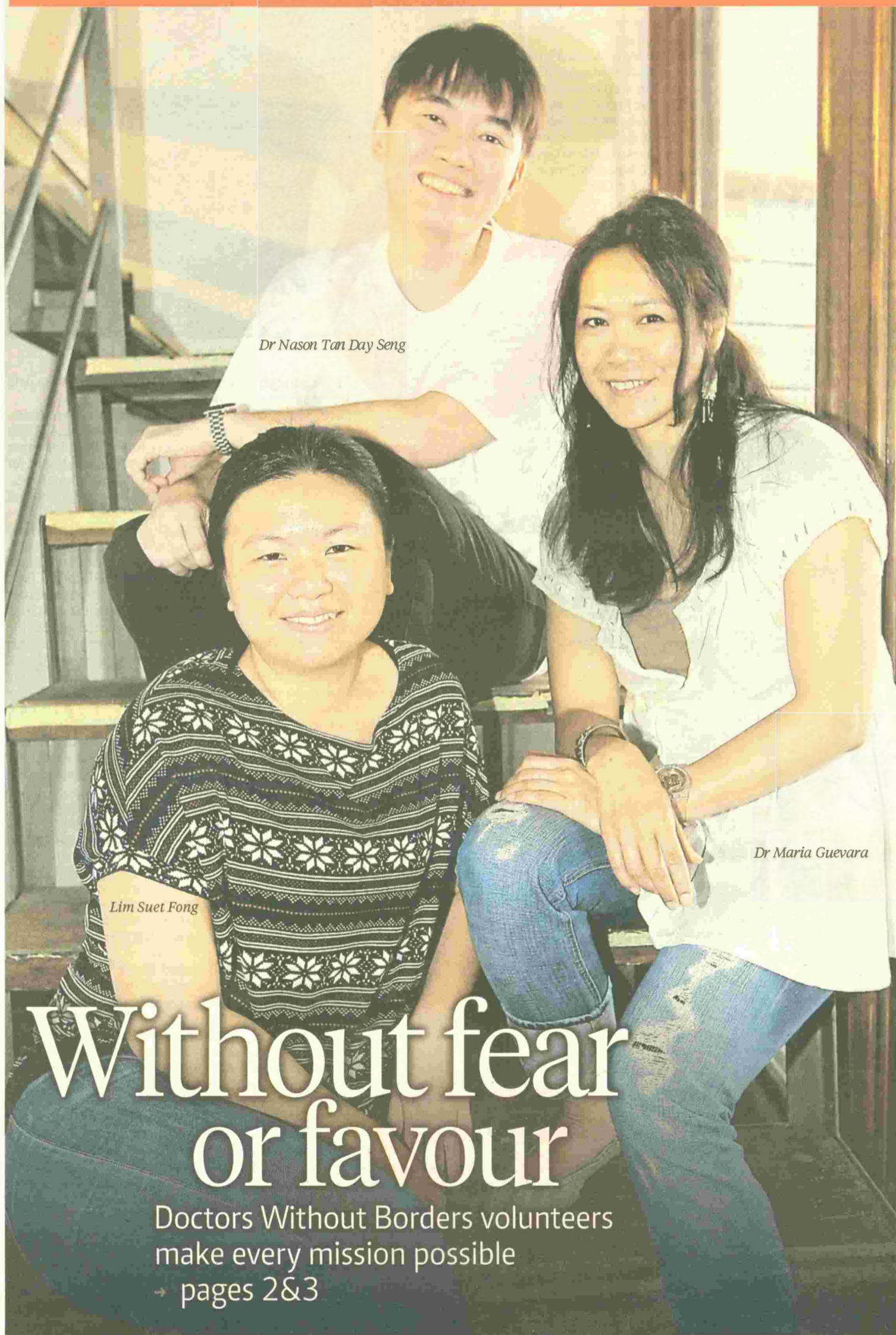


JULY 13, 2013

LIFE & TIMES

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BROWSER



Dr Nason Tan Day Seng

Lim Suet Fong

Dr Maria Guevara

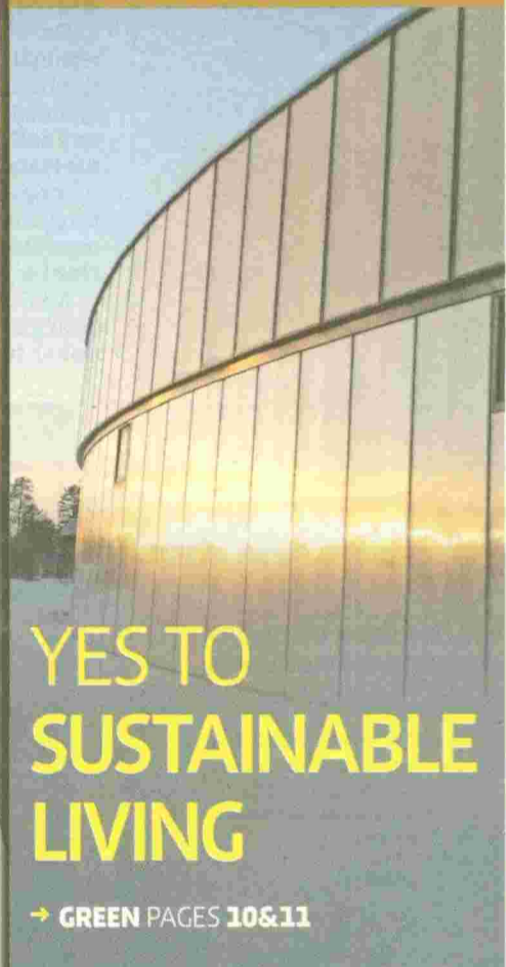
Without fear or favour

Doctors Without Borders volunteers
make every mission possible

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DAN BROWN'S PICK

→ WELL LIT PAGE 9



YES TO SUSTAINABLE LIVING

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HaKU stays true to indie

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LIFE&TIMES PEOPLE

A journey of service

Three volunteers with Doctors Without Borders tell **Aneeta Sundararaj** their unforgettable experiences

THE international medical humanitarian organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders — MSF) recently held the photo exhibition *Behind The Scenes: The Journey Of Doctors Without Borders* at The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

The aim of the exhibition was to raise awareness of humanitarian crises and to gain the support of Malaysians on world issues that matter.

Dr Maria Guevara, 47, MSF regional humanitarian representative in Asia, explains that MSF was founded in 1971 by a group of doctors and journalists in the wake of the Biafra war in Nigeria.

It was created in the belief that all people have the right to medical care regardless of gender, race, religion, creed or political affiliation.

MSF remains independent of both governments and of institutional funding. Ninety

per cent of its funding comes from private donations.

“MSF recognises the growing significance of Southeast Asia and Malaysia, in particular,” says Dr Guevara. “We know that we need to engage actively with society here to begin the discourse on how we can work together to tackle crises of significance which affect all of us at some time or another.”

Born in the Philippines, Dr Guevara is no stranger to the region. Her interest in medicine and humanitarian work started when she was a child.

“Both my parents are doctors. They used to do missionary work. Whenever my father came back,



“I have absolutely no regrets joining MSF. I've had the best time of my life.”
Lim Suet Fong

I thought he was such a hero,” says Dr Guevara. After obtaining her medical degree in the US in 1993, she received training in internal medicine and specialised in pulmonary and critical care.

Any professional who has chosen to leave his much-loved profession will empathise with Dr Guevara. She says: “Medicine is wonderful. But it has become a business and very litigious. A lot of what doctors do now is watch their back. I just wanted to do the work. Not filling out forms, claiming expenses and so on. One day, I realised I wanted to be where there are no doctors rather than where there already are more than enough doctors. So I took a 100 per cent pay cut and joined MSF.”

She emphasises her point, saying: “I've been with MSF for nine years now. And I've done fieldwork in places like Liberia, Guatemala, Haiti, Congo, Nigeria and Myanmar. Each year, I take between two weeks and two months to do interim work in the US, but I enjoy it less and less. It's the bureaucracy that gets to me each time.”

Dr Nason Tan Day Seng, 42, echoes what Dr Guevara says. “You join medicine knowing it's hard work. But the working environment — where you end up having hardly any life elsewhere — changes things.”

Once he resigned from government service, he went to Nepal as a volunteer to provide medical care and teach English to Tibetans living there. Upon his return, he was determined to start anew and help “those most deserving of aid”. He set up his general prac-

tice, applied to work for MSF as a field worker and was recruited.

A graduate from Manipal, India, Dr Tan chose to go to Africa. His first mission was to Ethiopia for three months. He provided treatment for children under 5 and women who were malnourished, pregnant and lactating.

Comparing the situation in India with Africa, he says: “In India, yes, there is poverty in the rural areas, but the access to medical aid isn't impossible. They can find transport to take them the hospital. In Africa it's worse. Sometimes, these people need a few days to reach a health centre and when they get there, there's no one to help them. They feel that they might as well stay where they are and see what happens. Death is a normal thing.”

To illustrate, he tells of his time in Sierra Leone. “In one day, there were five deaths in the space of a very short time.”

Shaking his head, he says: “Sure, I've seen death before. But this one ... this was the first time I had to deal with it. I had a breakdown which lasted half a day. Then, I had to refocus and get back to work. You have to keep in mind what you're there for and that you have limited resources to work with all the time.”

FOR A GOOD CAUSE

To get an idea of just how much these volunteers give up to work for MSF, Dr Guevara reiterates: “When I said a 100 per cent pay cut, I meant it. I was earning about US\$100,000 (RM300,000) a year. Now, with a stipend, you will start with US\$600 a month. It'll increase as you continue but it's not the same and can be quite a shock.”

“I mean,” she adds, glancing at the photo of an aerial view of one of the biggest refugee programmes MSF set up, “look at that place. When we're on a mission, there are no creature comforts. There's no air conditioner. You're standing out in the sun, looking at the sky, waiting for rain so that it cools down. It's the same in the hospitals. I was used to all that medical technology. There were labs and resources read-



“I wanted to be where there are no doctors rather than where there already are more than enough doctors.”
Dr Maria Guevara

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my job as 'log constructor' and 'base log' involves doing everything but provide medical attention. I fix light bulbs, make sure there's water for everyone and coordinate everything."

Adds Suet Fong, a civil engineer by training: "In the first four months I was in Afghanistan, I was very frustrated. I only saw the expats and officers. I asked for a transfer and went to Kunduz. There, I worked at an old hospital abandoned by the Russians. We set up a trauma centre and an X-ray department. I saw people who came in sick and left with a smile."

Eager to share more, Suet Fong says: "One day, the Taliban were targeting the governor. He did die and there were casualties. But everyone rallied around and no one complained. The carpenter carried stretchers and no one said, 'This is not my job.' I was so proud of all we'd achieved, I wanted to cry."

She adds: "If I fix a soap container, they'll be so happy. Here, I do the same, and no one will even notice."

Dr Tan nods. "Suddenly, things like

iPhone and computers aren't so important anymore."

These comments demonstrate something Dr Guevara calls Reverse Culture Shock. "It is sometimes difficult when volunteers come back. It's a form of culture shock, but in reverse. I'll give you an example. When I returned after one of my missions in Liberia, I was in JFK airport in the US when I heard these women complaining about the hairdryer in the hotel they stayed in during a holiday. After what I'd just seen, I was like, seriously?"

Taking a deep breath, Dr Guevara points to another photo. "See that one? The one of the shadow of a soldier. That reminds me of the time we had to negotiate access through a town. I saw a soldier and when I looked at him, he was just a child in fatigues. Some of them don't even know what they're doing. Sometimes, all they want is a cigarette."

"And I'm scared because there are volunteers who have been bayoneted for refusing to give them what they want."

Shaking her head, she admits: "There is a diminishing of the humanitarian space. It has to do with the politicisation of aid."



Photo of a soldier in Somalia by Peter Casaer.

FAMILY'S SUPPORT

All three volunteers are certain that none of what they do is possible without the support of their family. Still, the initial response from family to the news they were joining MSF was different. "My mother wanted to come along," says Dr Guevara, a divorcee. "But I told her 'no' because at 80, it might be a little difficult for her."

"As the only boy in the family, my mother was extremely against it," says Dr Tan. "Africa is so far away. There's no communication and, more importantly, she worries about my safety."

For Suet Fong, who is still single, her family wasn't alone in worrying about her safety. "At first, the directors at MSF worried that in Afghanistan, since I'm Chinese, people will think I'm a prostitute from China."

Admitting that she was partly influenced by mainstream media's negative portrayal of Afghanistan, Suet Fong was surprised by what actually happened there. "We're always told they're terrible people. But they're nothing like that. In fact, in the airports, they are polite and allow the women to go first. It was always ladies first."

"No one thought I was a prostitute. In fact, most of them thought I was from Tajikistan. And it was very beautiful there. Not just in terms of the scenery but the beauty of humanity. For example, I asked

them how they view Muslims and their families. We should respect each other. No one is different. In fact, if a non-Muslim embraces Islam, he's considered 'higher' than one who is born a Muslim because he's like a newborn child."

Dr Tan agrees and adds that although the perception of Ethiopia is often of a famine-ravaged nation that is in shambles, he found something altogether different. "Ethiopia is a very rich country. Rich in its culture and history. The people are very proud of the fact that they've never been colonised. They have amazing food."

Despite the hardship they have been facing, one thing comes through loud and clear: For the first time in their adult lives, these three volunteers have a sense of pride at the high level of service they give to humanity.

This becomes patently obvious when Dr Tan says: "I am now a GP. My dream is to practise for nine months and go for a mission for three months every year. Those three months will be my holiday."

Dr Guevara nods and adds: "I hope that Malaysians will take this journey with us and experience the MSF odyssey for themselves."

It is Suet Fong's words that, in the end, say it all: "I have absolutely no regrets joining MSF. I've had the best time of my life."

ily available. Suddenly, all that you have is a face mask and an oxygen tank."

On how the organisation works, Dr Guevara says: "MSF doesn't consist of medical employees only. We have logisticians and other support workers. They make sure there's accountability for what we do. MSF will pay for your flight, your housing and engage someone who cooks and cleans. But that's because you're expected to concentrate on treating patients and nothing more."

Lim Suet Fong, 35, who is a logistician within MSF, concurs. "Yes,

PICTURES BY HALIMATON SAADIAH



"In one day, there were five deaths in the space of a very short time."
Dr Nason Tan Day Seng



MSF launches one of the biggest refugee programmes following the Gulf War. Teams provide assistance in Turkey, Iran and Jordan to Kurds driven from the homes by the advancing Iraqi army.