

# Finding Purpose in Serving Others

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Singaporean Daryl Tay charts his journey to Thailand's Khek Noi village to oversee a recovery shelter for children suffering from drug abuse and domestic violence.

BY Audrina Gan

Like many young Singaporeans, 30-year old Daryl Tay had the typical corporate dream before he graduated: enter the finance industry, climb the corporate ladder, settle down, get married and retire early.

But a prerequisite for graduating was to serve 70 hours of compulsory community service. This "slight detour" from the scheme of things saw the Singapore Management University economics graduate volunteer at Radion International.

The non-profit organisation provides longterm humanitarian aid to underprivileged and marginalised communities, primarily in Thailand and Laos. One of the communities it serves is the Hmong – an ethnic hill tribe dispersed across both countries as well as Vietnam and southern China. The mission that he joined involved screening children from abusive families at a Hmong village in northern Thailand while safeguarding them from traumas. And it got him thinking – hard – about what he, as an educated Singaporean, could do for the vulnerable.

During his final year at university, he took on a second internship with Radion. As he was sitting with its founder and executive director, Eugene Wee, at their field office, a 15-year-old boy, who was high on glue and roaming the streets, walked in and asked to speak to Radion staff.

When asked why he chose to sniff glue, the teenager gave an answer that disturbed Tay: "If you had just 20 baht, would you use it to buy a bowl of noodles that can keep you full for a few hours, or spend it on glue that will keep you full for days?"

This profound reply led Tay to understand the complexity of poverty. "I realised how unequal the world is," he says. "In affluent Singapore, most of us live above the curve.

We have good schools and healthcare. But those who live below the curve don't have these things. We can't blame the poor for being in this situation because they were born into an uneven playing field where the odds were pitted against them."

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Wishing to create more equality for these communities, he started full-time field work in the sub-district of Khek Noi – home to the largest Hmong community in Thailand with some 14,000 villagers – in June 2015. Radion’s Streetkids! Programme provides 24/7 rehabilitation shelter for children with a history of drug abuse, domestic violence and poverty.

Apart from providing counselling, the shelter also offers skills training, character development and tuition classes for the children to rebuild their lives.



Daryl Tay engages a group of Hmong children in a character development class.

“I spent my first year going through an acclimatisation training phase in Radion’s head office in Chiang Mai. I also spent the time learning conversational Thai, to better communicate with the locals that Radion serves,” he explains.

“I believe that language proficiency provides the foundation for understanding others, and that is crucial as we seek to administer humanitarian work in a crosscultural context.”

During his four years in the field, his work was to develop fund-raising avenues and represent the organisation in forging partnerships with donors and volunteer groups overseas. “A major facet of my work involves mentoring Singaporean youths who come here to serve,” he explains. “It’s important because most volunteers arrive with the best of intentions but are not always culturally sensitive. My job is to serve as the bridge between First World Singapore and developing communities such as Khek Noi, to ensure

that their projects add value and do not cause harm to the long-term work here. The volunteers need to be properly guided so that they can intervene in culturally sensitive and sustainable ways.”

Tay adds that Radion attempts to steer clear of running volunteer programmes that resembles “voluntourism” in which volunteers, for all their attempts to do good, often do not possess the relevant skills or cannot make long-term commitments to serving developing communities. “This results in projects that lack critical thought and the ability to transform lives,” he says.

**“ FOR TAY, HUMILITY IS KEY WHEN IT COMES TO REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE. ”**

### **SPEAKING A COMMON LANGUAGE**

Despite relishing the community work in Thailand, Tay admits one of the realities of working and living overseas is loneliness.

“In Singapore, I had a close-knit community of family and friends who constantly check up on me. While my Thai colleagues served alongside me, they have their own families to tend to,” he says.

For him, humility is key when it comes to adapting to a different culture. “The children that enter Radion’s rehabilitation shelters come from such dysfunctional backgrounds that they don’t start trusting you immediately, and approach you with a sense of suspicion,” he notes.

“We build trust when we demonstrate to the children that we genuinely care for them, and are willing to stand by them.”

Indeed, the local boys started opening up to him when he went fishing with them. “I wasn’t great at fishing, but the fact that I was humble enough to learn something that they were better at than me, it established that I cared for them,” he recounts.

### **RESTORING SELF-CONFIDENCE**

A moving case study that Tay shares was that of a nine-year-old girl called Cheryl (not her real name), whose father was an alcoholic and would often hit her mother in a drunken rage.

Radion brought Cheryl into its rehabilitation shelter in 2015. She started off facing many challenges as she struggled to adapt to a communal living environment.

“We were quite concerned because she preferred to keep to herself,” recalls Tay. “Often, we would find her sobbing quietly, on the brink of giving up.”



clockwise from left: Radion International provides long-term assistance including health check-ups to the marginalised Hmong community; Singaporean volunteers share speech development techniques during a workshop for the rehabilitated kids in Khek Noi.

After two years in the programme, and through the care of Radion’s resident social workers, she started enjoying school and building healthy friendships with other children in the shelter. “I remember the moment she topped her cohort in primary school and when we announced that to her parents, she was beaming with pride,” he says. “You may say it’s just primary school, but that moment is a significant milestone for children like Cheryl because this is a moment of self-realisation for them.”

Tay believes that working across cultures with the Hmong community in Thailand is an art. “While the community that we serve is a beautiful one, it’s plagued with poverty and violence. However, the people are resilient and have maintained a rich cultural vibrancy from the food to the music they play, and the traditions they practise,” he says.

“For example, their craft-making traditions such as weaving and embroidering are often nature-inspired motifs reflecting their respect for the environment they live in. Its geographical isolation has also enabled the community to maintain its cultural identity in a rapidly evolving world.”

Through his work with Radion, Tay says he learnt that the most precious things in life are often the simplest joys. “We find our greatest fulfilment in giving up what we hold dear for a cause that is greater than ourselves,” he says. “The most rewarding part of this work is witnessing the restoration of the children’s belief in themselves.”

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

A survey conducted among 600 Hmong community members reveals how Radion International has brought about a positive change.

54.4%	66.6%	75%	100%	79.1%
The drop in juvenile drug abuse rates after five years of anti-drug campaigns	of women now feel more respected by men	feel that a degree is important for their children to obtain a decent paying job	feel it is important for girls to be educated	feel that the community has better access to basic healthcare

