

# UNPACKING RADICAL PHILANTHROPY

## PURPOSE-DRIVEN PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

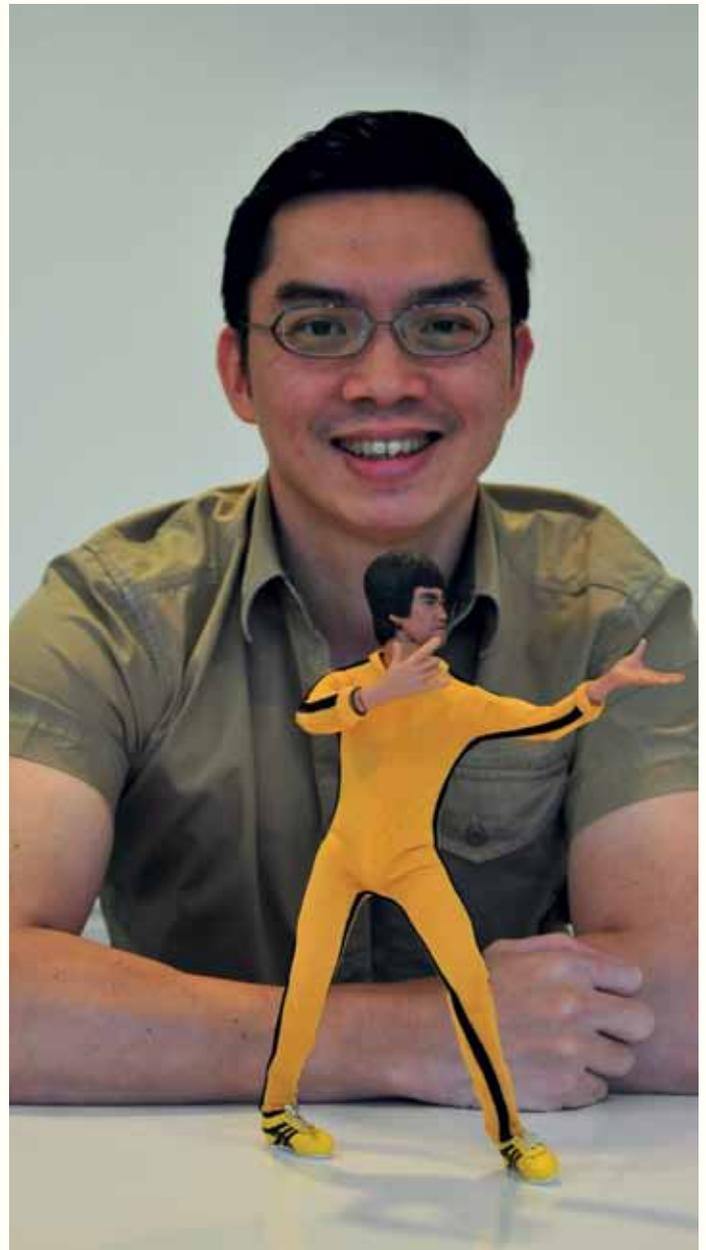
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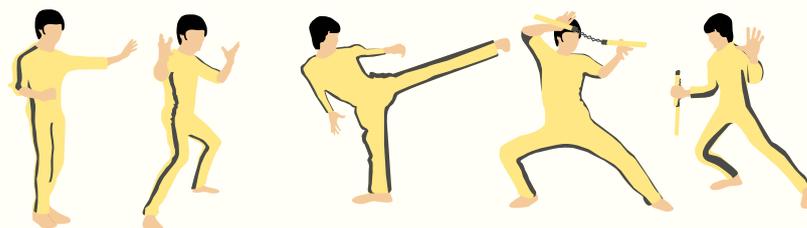
Being a proponent of radical philanthropy, the Lien Foundation's approach is to tackle the problem at its roots and offer long-term solutions. **Lee Poh Wah** tells *Social Space* how he equates radical philanthropy with practical remedy, and demystifies the term with a lucid explanation of his work at the Foundation.

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As the Lien Foundation's first professional staff, **Lee Poh Wah** transformed the Singapore family foundation into one noted for its radical approach and style. The Foundation achieved several firsts under his leadership. Its innovative IT initiatives set new standards for eldercare and pre-school education. His entrepreneurial practices steered the Foundation into the global arena with its advocacy for better care of the dying and set international benchmarks for end-of-life care with the inaugural Quality of Death Index. Lee was also instrumental in starting Lien AID, the Foundation's international development non-governmental organisation.

**“IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THE WAY TO REMOVE FEAR AND ANXIETY, OR DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF EUTHANASIA, IS TO AGGRESSIVELY ALLEVIATE SUFFERING BY MAKING HIGH QUALITY PALLIATIVE CARE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL.”**





**Having worked with the Ministry of Community Development (now Ministry of Social and Family Development) from 2002 to 2004, how would you compare being in philanthropy to working in the public service?**

I see more similarities than differences between philanthropy and public service, and perhaps, with politics too. Personally, I don't like the traditional definition of philanthropy being the love of humanity. It should be the love of humanity *in practice*. It has to involve action, and this same thinking can be applied to public service and politics.

The similarities also lie in the distribution of resources. We both have an agenda and we decide on who gets what and why. The difference is in the resources we have. At the foundation, we have some "ignorant money" while the civil service has a big team and deep war chest. For example, the government's social spending this year is set to be more than S\$20 billion. It has ample access to privileged information and a range of policy levers to use and control. So let me put it on record, there's a great myth that foundations are influential and at the cutting edge of social change. The practice of philanthropy has yet to fulfill its true potential.

**How did Lien Foundation identify the three areas of focus—education, eldercare and the environment?**

The Foundation was started by Dr Lien Ying Chow in 1980 for which he set aside close to half his wealth. The focus of the foundation since its inception had been on education. Things started to change when Laurence Lien was co-opted to the Board in 2002 and the areas of focus expanded to include eldercare, environment and families-at-risk. But these are catch-all categories that could mean everything or nothing. A critical challenge in philanthropy is to identify the primary purpose and priorities.

In 2006, we crystallised our mission statement into three areas of focus. We decided on water and sanitation. Singapore is positioned as a water hub, yet neighbours with titanic water and sanitation challenges surround us. I

believe that with leadership and wealth comes the responsibility to help the poor communities in the region. So while our government concentrated on the security and economic agenda, I was looking at the other end of the spectrum—exploring how water could be used to give a hydraulic halo to the country. In truth, I was more interested in helping the poor in Asia, for water is fundamental to human health and the foundation for human development.

Within eldercare, our main agenda is to improve care for the dying. In 2012, we tweaked our mission statement to narrow it down to three core "businesses" that included water and sanitation, care for the dying and fostering exemplary early childhood education. There is no ambiguity, and ours is purpose-driven philanthropy in action.

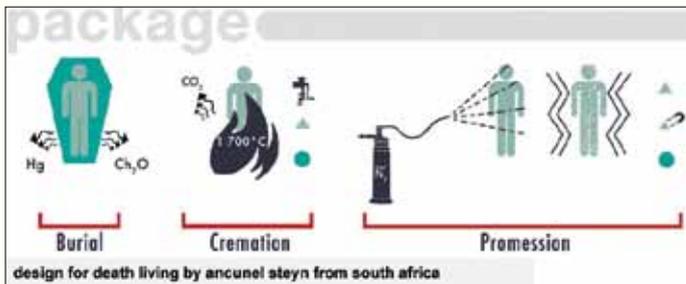
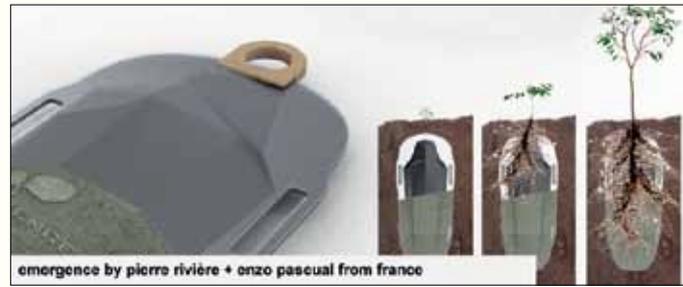
**Has it been easy keeping to these building blocks?**

Personally, I found it very easy for two reasons. Firstly, I don't have a messiah complex and secondly, you've got to be fiercely focused because you have finite bandwidth and limited resources. I'd like to quote one of my heroes, Bruce Lee, who said that concentration is the root of all higher abilities in man. How true! You need to pay attention and learn because learning begets learning, and success breeds success. The more you do, the better you get in that space. Sometimes, you just need to dive deeper and you'll find that a lot of compelling opportunities will surface.

**Can you talk about the theory of change in relation to the Foundation's work, particularly in early childhood education and end-of-life issues?**

I don't like jargon like theory of change. It is a simplistic narrative of a possible course of action to a complex problem. Philanthropy has a lot of theory and talk, but is short on inspired action. Sometimes, theories have the power to waste a huge amount of time. Instead, I strive to understand and respond to the reality and certainty of change.

Why did we choose early childhood education? That's because 90 per cent of our brains are formed by the age



*Design for Death Competition: Winning entries for the Eco/Green Deathcare Category.*

of five. A lot of our social competencies are hardwired by then. The debate is no longer about nature versus nurture; neuroscience has already shown that different environments can switch on or off different genes. Besides, the issues surrounding preschool is also linked with the ongoing debate on social inequality.

The reality is many countries have a widening social divide. You find this inter-generation transmission of power and privileges at the top, poverty and problems at the bottom. We know, of course, there's no equality in any society, not even in nature. But while you can't stop parents from giving the best to their children, you can actually help the children who are less privileged and right at the bottom. Put the children in an enriched environment, focus resources on the vulnerable and give each of them a fighting chance. Some children spend as many as ten or twelve hours each day in the preschool, which becomes their sanctuary and safe haven. There's still a working chance that more can be done for them to pick up good habits during this crucial period and hopefully, be given the opportunity to learn and bridge the gap.

If there is a weak link in our education system, the preschool phase will be it. We're looking at a lost decade of under-investment and neglect.

### **What about changing the mindset regarding end-of-life issues?**

All of us will die and the question is how we want to do it at the end of the day. I ask why so many people and their families are left to face the kind of death we all fear and despise—one marked by agony, misery and humiliation? The curse of longevity is the need to face with greater end-of-life challenges.

Unfortunately, our modern healthcare system is fixated on diseases and medical technology. They have forgotten their mandate, which is to alleviate suffering. The solution can be simple because pain can be managed. If you think about it, the way to remove fear and anxiety, or deal with the issue of euthanasia, is to aggressively alleviate suffering by making high quality palliative care accessible to all.

We live in a death-denying society, estranged from this topic. Unfamiliarity breeds anxiety. This is why we are driving advocacy efforts through our Life Before Death initiative.

Our latest is a tie-up with the ACM Foundation, which is started by the funeral house, Ang Chin Moh Casket. I look at funeral directors as experts in their own right. Like death, they too are stigmatised, but they should also be involved in our dialogues on end-of-life issues, just as we have done for palliative care professionals.

ACM Foundation and the Lien Foundation are collaborating on three initiatives. The first is the Design for Death<sup>1</sup> competition, an international design competition to re-imagine death care. Although we are two small outfits from Singapore, we are working with the National Funeral Directors Association, the global organisation representing funeral directors all over the world. We are also working with *designboom*, the world's biggest online magazine on design and architecture which administered the competition and curated the winning entries. We received more than 700 entries from over 40 countries with many fascinating ideas. You have people thinking about how fungi and algae can be used for decomposition. There were also entries that looked at solar power, sending the ashes to the stratosphere, and then the conversion of ashes into rain!

One funeral house consultant said we had helped to unleash sensational minds on the industry. Technology, emerging grey baby-boomers and the eco-friendly movement are factors that will impact future death-care products and services.

We are also looking at how we can transform the whole inpatient hospice experience. We've engaged a design company from Barcelona to examine this and recommend universal design principles for future generations of hospices. The third initiative is a community arts engagement programme set in a public hospital to foster "dielogs", a term we coined for conversations on end-of-life issues.

**In the earlier history of the Lien Foundation, the way you pushed the agenda for these areas was through the setting up of centres. So, you have Lien Centre for Palliative Care, Lien Centre for Social Innovation and Lien Aid. What was the thinking behind this?**

We simply wanted vehicles for implementation. Impact is a function of vision, courage and an understanding of how to use money to leverage change. I view money as a facilitator. The real currency is ideas and imagination. To have an impact, you need solid implementation. Take the example of water and sanitation. I spoke to people from the UN and Stockholm Water Week, and those involved in the field to understand the landscape. But when I wanted to do the work in Asia, no NGO had the capability to deliver our aspirations. So what did we do? We decided to take on some risk and build the machinery from scratch. That's when we started Lien Aid for learning and implementation. It has helped improve water and sanitation access for about half a million people since its formation in 2006.

**So you're simply more dedicated and you focus on the activity and dive deep. Is that the idea?**

Yes, that's the intent. But it's also important to empathise with the folks working on the ground. How do you find great people? I spend a significant amount of my time headhunting or even "begging" institutions and people

to work with us on our cause. Philanthropy is a relational enterprise; you work with and through people. Success is usually based on backing the right management team.

**Along with the setting up of centres, technology appears to be a key driver through Lien Foundation's work. What are your views on the use of technology in non-profit organisations?**

I view technology as a horizontal, and my verticals are pre-school, palliative care and water and sanitation. If you visit any typical NGO, many do not have a budget line item for IT or an IT staff. So, let's not even talk about NGOs pondering the strategic importance of IT.

We wanted to change all that because I saw it crucial not only to recruit good people but to also give them the best tools to enhance their productivity. That's especially pertinent in health care, and for us, in eldercare. Health care is very much an information-based industry and you need a strong IT backbone to orchestrate the care.

We have embarked on seven IT initiatives over the years. A salient example is the IngoT II<sup>2</sup> project that we rolled out in March this year. IngoT means using IT to stretch the capability, imagination and the potential of the NGO. With IngoT II, we put seven nursing homes on cloud computing and empowered them with mobility solutions. Peacehaven Nursing Home was the first to roll this out. As part of its IT transformation, it now uses 30 iPads and 15 BMWs (Bedside Mobile Workstations, which are similar to IT kiosks) in its care and workflow processes. Collectively, these seven homes account for about 20 per cent of all the nursing beds in Singapore. It is a hallmark project for us. Through IngoT II, labour productivity improved by at least 10 per cent and over 100 paper forms were eliminated from Peacehaven.

When you talk to the Peacehaven staff, you realise that IT has changed their outlook. They now have the right clinical or admin information at their fingertips, at the right time. They no longer have to hunt for onerous paper files. In a way, their imagination has been fired up and

now they look for new ways of how IT can further enhance their work. So IT is not just IT, it is total reorganisation and a culture change.

### Could you tell us more about NPalm?

NPalm was very successful in introducing the use of IT in nursing education and starting a positive mindset change towards technology. We rolled it out with Ngee Ann Polytechnic in 2007 for 200 of its final-year students. They trained nurses for a three-year diploma but effectively, the students spent one year out on clinical attachments in the hospitals and nursing homes. The students' learning was not very self-directed. In the frantic working environment, they were too shy to ask the staff nurses and doctors anything they didn't know. So, what we did was to move the entire curriculum into a PDA. This was before the iPhone.

We created a database of drugs used locally, nursing procedures, and also a nursing logbook inside the PDA. Suddenly, these student nurses could be smarter than the staff nurses. They could validate procedures and the dispensation of drugs instantaneously. Two years later, Ngee Ann's entire nursing school of 1,500 students and staff were using the system. They then migrated to the iPhone and now they even have their own App store.

### Policy has also become a key plank of Lien Foundation's work. How has the response been to the Quality of Death Index and the Starting Well Index?

Sometimes, if you want to seek reformation, people must be able to see reality. Leadership is about having the courage to face reality and mobilising people to tackle the challenges. We commissioned the global Quality of Death Index and the Starting Well Index to generate some self-reflection. I think that's where the value of independent research comes in. Ranking, in particular, is an effective tool on our policy-makers. We approached the Economist Intelligence Unit as they were the ones who first conceptualised the idea of the Quality of Life Index. We got them to turn the idea on its head by looking at the provision of end-of-life care. Luckily, there was political will from our government to want to address the deficiencies highlighted by the index.

### So the starting point was the Singapore government, and we know that the lever for influencing policies is indices and rankings. But in the process, you have also influenced other governments.

Yes, you can't go very wrong with an index because those who do well will give themselves a pat on the back and

say, "Well done! Let's continue to do our good work." And those who are down the rungs will feel the pressure to do better. The Singapore government has just doubled the preschool budget for the next five years.

With the Quality of Death Index, we won a lot of friends and goodwill with people coming to us saying they were using this tool to lobby governments, to fight euthanasia and to educate healthcare professionals. There were a lot of unintended consequences that we in our ignorance did not foresee.

### Another area of work with Lien Foundation has to do with the media. Why is it important to use media in your work?

The Foundation is a proponent of using media to move our mission. We live in an "ADHD world" with hedonistic tendencies where one is bombarded with 3,000-5,000 marketing messages daily. Causes compete for mindshare, so it is a huge challenge to rise above the cacophony and shine the light on an issue. I do think that in an age where there is nothing really novel or new that people are saying, style and design becomes paramount. *How you say something* is more important than what you have to say.

We have made seven films to date, and I just want to share about the *Life Before Death*<sup>3</sup> feature film which rolled out last year on World Cancer Day. It was filmed in 11 countries, including Singapore, and over 40 nationalities were represented. The film looked at the crisis of untreated pain and profiled palliative care professionals doing amazing work at the frontline. Credit goes to the film producer and director. The film has been shown in 40 countries at more than 300 physical screenings. In Australia, the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing attended a special screening of the film in Parliament House. I think close to 35,000 people have seen the film.

Because we had so much footage, 50 short films were produced from the original film and these were provided free online. These have been downloaded 4,000 times and many of these clips are being used for training and advocacy purposes. A thousand and three hundred DVDs have been sold with 70 per cent of these purchased by educational and healthcare institutions. We even had the film sold on iTunes and it received 800 paid downloads. The TV version of the film was also screened in countries like the Czech Republic, Jamaica, India and Australia. It has impacted decision makers to amend policies related to pain-relief drugs and catalysed the provision of palliative care in developing countries. Our modest investment has paid off with maximal impact.

### How do you see these approaches—setting up centres, technology, influencing policy, and media—working together?

Typically, when I look at a project, I look for six possible attributes or characteristics. They are new models, capacity building, charity, research, advocacy and networks. Each project subsumes a few of these characteristics.

When I say *new models*, I'm referring to new service delivery models. We are building a better *mousetrap*, experimenting and developing new models. *Capacity building* is about training and equipping people with better tools, whether it's IT or something else, to be more efficient in their work. *Charity* is quite straightforward – to help those who are needy and marginalised. *Research* is informing policy, practice or the public; and *advocacy* is about harnessing the media to foster awareness and shaping people's opinions. Finally, it's establishing *networks* and looking at how we can parachute ourselves into the circles of thought leaders and influencers in the domains of our interest.

Sometimes it's counter-intuitive. Take research for example, we commission research not just because we want to learn about a certain issue; we also hope to make friends in the process and many experts are more than happy to come forward to share their thoughts. By working on a campaign, we are not just promulgating messages and engaging our target audiences. We get to better understand the issues and meet a lot of stakeholders out there.

So these are some of the ways I view a typical project. I can't tell you the weighting of the portfolio. We are really just trying—punching left, right and centre; eventually, the wall will crumble.

### Would you say this is the radical philanthropy Lien Foundation practises?

We're just here to solve problems. Although the term "radical philanthropy" sounds sexy, another phrase for it is really "practical remedy." Don't over conceptualise or intellectualise philanthropy. Like life, you've got to live it. Bruce Lee said, "Knowing is not enough, you must apply. Willing is not enough, you must do." I can share all my kung fu with you but if you don't go out there and practise, you will not achieve anything either.

At the Foundation, we try to build a very different organisation with a different attitude and style. Now, let me explain why you need to be unconventional. If you look

at a business or any endeavour, strategy is about doing different things from the competition or doing the same thing in different ways. So, excellence, by its very definition, is deviation from the norm. If you want to have excellence, don't imitate others because that's just a recipe for mediocrity. I habitually do things that others won't do. Think the unthinkable, mix the unmixable and entertain the inconceivable. At the board level, they have given me the space to do that.

### Do you practise martial arts?

I don't, but I see philanthropy as a form of kung fu; its part-art, part-science and part-spirituality. The Chinese word "kung fu" often connotes a special power or success, and is frequently associated with medical prowess, culinary talents or skills par excellence.

Bruce Lee is an international icon and I admire his strength, brilliance and iconoclasm. Despite his brief period on the world stage, he was a formidable and positive force who made a tremendous impact in his lifetime. His influence as a martial arts innovator, actor and philosopher has moved Hollywood, broken boundaries, and inspired many. His philosophies reflect some of my personal beliefs and philanthropic ideas. I strive to apply myself to "fight" imaginatively, constructively, and systematically to solve social challenges. ■



### Endnotes

- 1 The Lien Foundation and ACM Foundation launched the Design for Death international design competition to catalyse the international creative and design community to re-think and re-imagine death care for the future. See [www.designboom.com/competition/design-for-death/](http://www.designboom.com/competition/design-for-death/)
- 2 Lien Foundation changes the face of Singapore's nursing homes with bold IT initiative, 26 March 2013, [www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/news/2013/IngoT%20II%20Final%20Press%20Release%2026Mar2013Combined.pdf](http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/news/2013/IngoT%20II%20Final%20Press%20Release%2026Mar2013Combined.pdf).
- 3 The Life Before Death campaign in 2010 not only challenged death's conventions but also took the taboo topic out of the box and into the realm of social media, art, films and photography. The multi-award winning movie, *Life Before Death* was presented by Lien Foundation and produced by Moonshine Movies. See: [www.lifebeforedeath.com/movie/index.shtml](http://www.lifebeforedeath.com/movie/index.shtml).