

# The Secret of my Success: The ASEAN Experience

by

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## **The Way I was - Always "Second Class"**

As a child I had always wanted something more than the ordinary, and dreamed of the day when I could be someone different and better than what my middle class parents afforded us.

I was not born "Shelley" but "Helen", according to my birth certificate. And for many years I suspected that I was an adopted child, which robbed me of my self-esteem. To add fuel to my unhealthy little imagination was the fact that Mom was the beauty of the little community we lived in, and relatives always comparing me to her made me feel ugly and insecure. We had two Cantonese maids then, one to cook and one to mind the three of us before my two sisters came along. However, I was neglected, as our maid from China pampered only my two brothers, often telling me girls were not important. That often led to arguments with her, but that was also the beginning of the development of the importance of justice and equality in me.

My teen years were fun as I enjoyed school, being liked by my teachers, and I was labeled "mature, grown-up and sensible". I saw myself as an ideal housewife, serving a husband and being a wonderful mother and loving wife living in a pretty house with garden, all provided for by a husband I would adore - the influence of the advent of black and white American TV programmes. My role models, thus, were the American housewives who vacuumed happily in their high-heeled shoes and pretty dresses! Thus it did not rile me much when Dad sent only my brothers overseas for their studies with the money he had saved for the purpose - girls, after all, would only end up being housewives after they got married.

I excelled in swimming, however, and was trained daily by the national coach of Singapore.

## **The Light in the Tunnel**

It thus was no surprise that I met my husband in the swimming pool and, being brought up very strictly, got engaged and married young as my parents did not believe in my having many boyfriends! By then I had graduated from high school and was in college training for teaching and education - my parents' choice, as teachers worked only half days with the other half of the day available for the family. It worked well with me, as my vision of myself as an ideal housewife materialised! In school, I enjoyed imparting and being creative but the workload and inflexibility in the system soon turned me into a grouchy, discontented disciplinarian!

I was an education officer for a total of seventeen years, rising to the ranks of head of department and public high school examiner when my chance to resign came - Dad's passing in Hong Kong as bank president resulted in our re-assignment to the banks he had established. We left Singapore and became totally absorbed in the grand lifestyle of the upper echelons there. I was given the opportunities to enhance my interpersonal skills cross-culturally with the different social groups we entertained and were entertained by.

Soon, however, I grew tired of the frivolous lifestyle, and looked for a more meaningful purpose in life. I started teaching English to Chinese immigrants in our Baptist church as a volunteer, and eventually was persuaded to accept a job at the local university where I also enrolled as a student majoring in language and literature. It was the beginning of self-awareness - that I needed to feed a hungry mind and a hungry soul.

I tried hard to drop my identity as my father's daughter and my husband's wife in finding my own identity. I had met several role models who motivated me into seeing a new and achieving me, not merely someone playing the secondary role I had for thirty-five years of my life! They opened my eyes and my heart to what I could be.

"Success at that point in time was to be able to be my best, and to enjoy doing what I was best at. It also meant a status and position in a society, which helped tremendously in my personal power to influence what I could do.

## **The Turning Point - Overcoming Barriers**

My new discovery of myself was so exciting I felt overpowered by it! I drove myself hard through work and did so well that job opportunities were coming in, to my husband's dismay because I was even prepared to stay away from my family just for the job.

However, Divine Intervention stepped in - I came down with tuberculosis and we frantically had to pack up for home. It was the pits for me at that time, returning to Singapore at the height of my so-called success without a job, and ill. I tried to teach but couldn't adjust to the phobia I experienced within the confines of the four walls of the classroom - negative thoughts and overwhelming emotions of my dislike for teaching hit me harder than I expected.

After what I felt was a humbling period in my life, I eventually went into part-time training in an international organisation. By this time, a miracle had happened - my x-rays actually did not detect any signs of TB, neither was there any scarring!

I enjoyed my new work as it enabled me to be in touch with large organisations, some MNCs, and I also found that training and human resources were interesting areas I could develop in. Research and development took up a great part of my time as I continued to improve my training sessions. I also attended training programmes to train myself locally, regionally and internationally.

This was the time when I had to assert myself in being myself to my corporate clients. I refused to ride on my husband's established name for projects. I also had to stand up for what my values were, leaving the organisation I was in to start out on my own because I discovered the organisation was not practicing what it was preaching.

I felt I was not honest to our clients, over-selling and under-delivering. About two years after I left, the same company went bankrupt - sued by its creditors.

I started out as a very small-time sole proprietor, a one-person show without even proper letterheads, receipts and training equipment. Believing as always in being professional, I had to fight against my husband to invest in these. His favourite line to me at that time was, "You're too small for ... this. . . that! He was only trying to protect me from losses and unnecessary investments.

To be ahead of competitors and clients, I attended and enjoyed international conferences. There was so much to learn about trends and resources from the experts. I was often the only Asian in the room, and at times shunned by the participants because they did not know how to interact with Asians, especially Asian women who were often overlooked for being quiet and unassertive. I garnered my courage to interact with them.

Soon I converted my sole proprietorship to an incorporated company and, as my network grew and, believing that God didn't want me in any place without a special reason, I got SSI incorporated in the US using my family's home as a

start-up office. It was through my contact with Duke University that my Principal Consultant now sits on the Board of Advisers for its DELTA Program. I am continuing to recruit speakers and build alliances from my US base.

With my own business and personal boundaries established with my family who are now fortunately living overseas, I am able to BE the international professional I've always wanted to be. My greatest challenge was to un-harness myself from the straps of "I can't do this and that" because I am a woman, mother, wife, Chinese, Singaporean, own a small outfit, etc. I have an understanding and supportive husband now who is completely comfortable with a wife who travels and does business her way. My children are independent professional adults and no longer need to be (s)mothered!

## **Change ..... and Passion**

Success to me now is not just the number of companies I own, nor the money I have in my bank. It is how much I have lived, learnt, how much I can affect change in my clients to make them more competitive and the difference I make to them and the people around me. Success is being balanced with a life outside work and also having good, wholesome children.

In terms of size and staff, we are very lean and mean and have very low overheads - we don't work for the landlords. We work with associates on a project basis. Credibility comes from my integrity and deliverables which make up my brand value.

My personal success, as I see it, is my being able to spot, and the willingness to seize, opportunities and change with the times, if possible, ahead of others. It is also how I open my mind to the world, and being a player with the rest of it.

Change, together with passion, has always driven the way I work, perform and deliver my goods to the clients. Being small and a decision-maker myself, I am able to change immediately to be competitive.

I work and play hard, investing my time in what I feel will make me a more balanced and better person. Travelling to beautiful countries puts back the perspective of the smallness of the human being, and reminds me of the balance in nature. It humbles me to see mountains, big trees and God's wonderful creations, and how all survive in coexistence. I have been told I'm a passionate person - I pour more than 100% of my passion in whatever I believe is worth doing.

## **Building International Networks for Business Success**

With my wide network, I am (over) exposed to the exciting trends happening around us and implement whatever is applicable for my business and clients quickly.

I have been very fortunate to have the support of the Canadian and Australian High Commissions for my third company, FemmE-net.com Pte Ltd. On looking back, I think it was the courage in networking and asking "Why not?", instead of "Why?" that brought about my opportunities. Some of what I did took a big mindset change, and time, at times at the expense of my sleep and health! But I thank God for seeing my earnestness through.

The Deputy Trade and Industry Minister of Canada launched my website in Vancouver last November and the Australian High Commission, together with the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, launched my book, the first e-book in Singapore, on International Women's Day 2000. It was *an* honour I wouldn't have enjoyed had I pulled back and said, "Oh no, who am I that they want to do this for?" However, networking and building international bridges means reciprocating at the right time and I am most willing to give them my support at anytime.

It was also crossing international borders that brought about my second company, Corporate Charisma International. I saw my present partner's book being featured on an inflight BBC programme. Excited by its contents, I persisted to track him around the world, and finally got him into partnership with me. We have secured big projects in branding and re-positioning organisations. Opportunities are everywhere, often in the least unexpected places. I just needed to identify them and work on them once I'm sure there is a market for them.

## **The Way I Am Now ..... And the Future**

Things did not just happen for me - I had unconsciously worked at my dream and am only beginning to realise it after mistakes, some very painful, and turnarounds. People have made use of me, but they get to use me only once. I have learnt that just because I am straight and honest, not everyone is so, but I live to see the day and they eventually don't. An understanding and supportive husband and family are critical to women who want to make good in the jungle out there. I also need a shoulder to cry on.

Perhaps I could round off what success means with the acronym B.E.S.T.

**B** Believe in myself. I was brought up without much encouragement to fulfill my dreams, nor build big dreams as a second class person. Barriers had to be broken for me to be my best. I stopped work for three months to write and compile my first book but I did it. I felt it was time to model after our own Asian women barrier breakers. I broke my back doing it but, with the help of my co-publisher, managed to get it out on time for International Women's Day 2000. It was also Singapore's first e-book. It is also critical to believe in my product and what I do - with passion, as it helps me to differentiate.

**E** Evaluate myself. What is my driving passion? What are my strengths that I can build on? Who/ what do I need to complement me? What is it I want out of life?

Energise myself for success. I am fortunate to have a tremendous amount of energy and I use it untiringly to add value to my work, my workshops, my networking, my creativity and my community involvement. Being able to return my country for what it has given me and my family is important to me.

Energise and motivate your team members and your organisation.

Exceed the expectations of your clients.

Expenses are investments when used on the right things/people.

Evaluation goes, too, for my products and my services so I make on-going improvements to stay ahead.

**S** Stand up for my beliefs.

Sell and promote my brand value, each and every time.

Seize opportunities, have the courage to try

Stick to what I think I can/cannot do - I should know best

**T** Transform for change that is beneficial for me and my company/clients for that cutting edge, innovative new ideas.

Train to be ahead of others.

Travel and network for visibility, connectivity and opportunities.

Tap on mentors and build relationships with advocates and supporters.

Touch the minds and hearts of my clients, apply the PASSION Model.

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I see my future as one where I hope God will not slow me down, but continue to spur me on, never to retire but to re-fire and renew with joy and abundant living...and make a difference. That will be my success.