

BUILDING A VILLAGE

BY LEILA LAI

Serial entrepreneur Elaine Kim juggles multiple businesses as she goes through seasons of life with different areas of focus. Currently, she is devoting her energy and passion to Trehaus – where a family can work, learn and play together.

A DESIRE to make a difference in others' lives can manifest in several ways. Some people pursue caring professions such as medicine and social work, while others devote time to non-profit organisations or social enterprises. Entrepreneurial ones may set up businesses that further their vision of impacting the world for good.

Elaine Kim has done all three. Her long list of current job roles includes palliative care doctor at HCA Hospice Care; co-founder and CEO of CRIB, a social enterprise focused on empowering female entrepreneurs; and co-founder and CEO of Trehaus, a co-working space in Funan Mall with preschool and childcare facilities to provide work-life balance for parents and quality education for the young ones.

"Trying to make a social impact is something that was instilled in me at a young age," says Dr Kim, citing her parents, education and Christian faith as influences that moulded her passion for social causes. "What drives me is trying to make a positive difference in other people's lives, trying to make other people's lives better. That has been the driving force behind all of the different initiatives that I've launched."

As a doctor, she cares for patients in their last days, ensuring that they are comfortable and supporting their families during this time. At CRIB, she has helped create a community of female entrepreneurs and investors who not only support one another, but also give back to society by raising funds for needy communities such as families recovering from the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

Through Trehaus School's preschool and childcare programmes, Dr Kim hopes to leave the biggest possible impact on the next generation with a specially designed curriculum based on Silicon Valley schools and the latest research in early childhood education.

BUSINESS WITH A VISION

Dr Kim co-founded Trehaus to help working parents like herself overcome the challenge of choosing between work and family. The preschool and childcare element provided an opportunity to implement a new brand of research-based education, rather than replicating traditional models.

"A lot of schools run the way they do because it's just the way it's been done for decades, even centuries," she says. "But the world is changing so much, and education hasn't changed."

Some things different about Trehaus School are the mixed age learning



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– Dr Kim (left) with Trehaus co-founders Elizabeth Wu and Tjin Lee

approach, where younger children can learn from older ones; a teacher-child ratio of 1:5; and how parents are strongly encouraged to get involved in the process. These and other aspects of the school were developed in consultation with experts from Stanford’s Bing Nursery and Silicon Valley’s Khan Lab School, as well as other experts trained in the Reggio Emilia approach.

Trehaus School’s programmes focus on building character and equipping children with skills that they will need for future challenges. The basics of language and mathematics remain an important part of the curriculum, but aside from knowledge-based learning, the lessons will encourage grit and empathy, creativity, adaptability, confidence and teamwork.

With the small student-to-teacher ratio, teachers become like second parents to the children. This, says Dr Kim, creates a sense of security that allows the students to learn better. Parents can drop by anytime to participate in the learning journey. This gives them more opportunities to bond with their children.

“This is something that I truly believe is going to make an impact – raising a generation of children who really think about the world, think about how they can make a difference, who are prepared for a very different world and can help find solutions for future problems,” Dr Kim says.

“Education is maybe one of the biggest impacts that you can make on children. And in the lives of every one of the parents who are able to spend that extra time with their kids, that is also a huge impact on a personal scale.”

It takes a village to raise a child, as the saying goes, and Dr Kim hopes that Trehaus will become the modern village for the next generation. She

already sees signs of community forming among the parents who work there – when a parent falls sick, others make meals for them and offer to look after their children.

“There is beauty in the like-minded community. We have that in CRIB and Trehaus. As female entrepreneurs, we tend to be more social. It’s important to have those social networks, especially as a lot of business networks are male-dominated.”

HELPING WOMEN AND CHILDREN

While Dr Kim is careful to distinguish between Trehaus, a for-profit business, and CRIB, a social enterprise, the two overlap in their aim to help women and children. “They’re really quite separate, but because they are all (aimed) towards wanting to create impact, wanting to support other working parents and female entrepreneurs like myself, and wanting to raise the next generation of children like my own children, they tend to have similar like-minded communities,” Dr Kim explains.

Trehaus also would not exist without CRIB, as Dr Kim met her co-founder and received funding for the business through the CRIB Match programme, which connects entrepreneurs with potential co-founders, employees and investors. “Trehaus will not be born today, if not for the magic that is made by bringing together like-minded people,” she says.

She drew on her experience as a female entrepreneur when she decided to found CRIB with three co-founders. She realised that achieving work-family balance and building a support network was especially difficult for female entrepreneurs as working parents, and wanted to empower women with the right network, funding and skills to thrive and succeed.

Hitting on a sustainable model for CRIB was no easy task. CRIB members pay a small membership fee to keep the enterprise going, and most of its activities are run by a team of passionate volunteers. As a result, scaling CRIB’s work to help more women remains a major challenge, says Dr Kim. The success of a social enterprise is more intangible and harder to measure. But she knows that CRIB is having an impact when members are able to make their business dreams come true, and more successful businesses come out of the programmes.

CRIB also taps these members to give back to society through its charity arm CRIB Gives Back by raising funds and awareness for beneficiary charities through events such as its biennial CRIB Ball. Dr Kim shares that CRIB focuses on supporting women and children, saying: “If you can give a leg up to women and children in poverty, women who are being sex-trafficked, that’s hugely impactful. If we can raise one person up, it has impact for generations.”

It also prefers charities that are transparent and whose work can be clearly seen. For example, CRIB works with Operation Hope Foundation on a Holiday For Hope initiative that conducts trips to places such as Cambodia and Nepal to distribute necessities, build homes and support schools.

“Instead of giving a donation to someone anonymously, thousands of miles away, we’re actually going in to see what we built with the money. We actually see what has that led to, who are the people we helped, meet them and spend time with them.”

PERSONAL DRIVE

When it comes to personal interests, her daily work in palliative care remains a cause that is dear to her heart, allowing her to impact the lives of patients and their families by helping add life to the patients’ last days.

She is involved in multiple businesses – besides CRIB and Trehaus, she co-founded luxury bridal and evening gown business Trinity Bridal and Trinity Gallery, event planning company Milk and Honey Event Design and jewellery brand Atelier Solitaire – but says she goes through “seasons” of life with different areas of focus. In this current season, she is devoting her energy and passion to ensuring Trehaus flourishes.

When asked to share something she does not often get to talk about, she gives a shout-out to her husband John Kim, who is similarly passionate about creating impact. “As a venture capitalist, he creates impact by raising up businesses that he believes will make a positive difference in the world,” Dr Kim says. “He’s very driven, and that also inspires me to be better.”

She adds: “I have great co-founders and a great supportive husband. It’s the whole support network that makes this a reality, not a sole person that can get it done. It takes a village to succeed.” ■