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Dec 3, 2004

Geh Min

Eye surgeon and Nature Society president Geh Min is one of nine fresh faces - and the only civil society activist - among the new Nominated MPs appointed by President S R Nathan on Monday. Laurel Teo speaks to her

DR GEH Min might have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but her rubber and pineapple tycoon grandfather made sure she was also fed a healthy dose of the value of thrift.



The late philanthropist Lee Kong Chian hated waste of any sort, and was, to his granddaughter, 'the original recycling champion'.

Each shirt on his back was worn until it had 'more holes than cloth', and not a soul in his extended household escaped his strict campaign against wasting electricity.

Before the patriarch descended the stairs for dinner each day, he would inspect each empty room to make sure that all lights were off. Once, he caught out the young Geh Min.

'I used to be afraid of the dark, and would leave a small reading lamp on. There was this day when I forgot to switch it off, and he gave me a really stern lecture I never forgot,' she recalls.

Now 54 and an ardent conservationist, the eye surgeon says it was the old Mr Lee who planted the seeds of an environmental conscience in her.

Any budding presumptions of her as a 'tai-tai' are promptly squashed by the stacks of medical tomes spilling off the shelves onto the work table in her Mount Elizabeth office, which she shares with her heart surgeon husband.

The plain-speaking woman is every inch the intellectual professional, much more at ease proffering serious thoughts than posing for the camera.

Dr Geh, who has been president of the Nature Society since 2000, almost winces when you ask if the environmental cause is one that is too 'narrow' and 'elitist', confined to those with full stomach and idle time to kill.

It is a question for which she has sharpened a ready retort.

Contrary to the 'elitist' tag, nature activities are highly accessible, certainly more so than, say, a game of golf, to the average Joe. And most Singaporeans actually care about the environment and their

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numbers are growing, she would have you know.

'Go to any of these parks during, well, not even weekends, on weekday evenings, and you can see how many people there are. All our parks are over-utilised,' notes Dr Geh, who is a regular at the nature reserves of Sungei Buloh, Bukit Timah and MacRitchie.

Of the scores of letters her society receives, many are from people living in the heartland. A recent national survey also shows that 85 per cent of Singaporeans feel it is important to retain nature reserves. The proportion is even higher among younger people.

And if that's not convincing enough, a nature walk club she started with the Southwest Community Development Council (CDC) six months ago has drawn more than 2,000 members.

While she has been plugging the environmental cause for some years, it would not have occurred to her to take it to Parliament if not for three women, she reveals.

Current NMP Jennifer Lee and former NMP Kanwaljit Soin both had positive experiences as NMPs and felt 'it would be fruitful for me to also use this as a platform'.

They were her proposer and seconder in her application for the post.

Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Yu-Foo Yee Shoon also offered valuable advice.

'She showed me that if I really wanted to make an impact, I cannot just serve a narrow constituency,' she says.

It was Mrs Yu-Foo who got her onboard the Southwest CDC to chair its environmental committee, allowing her to gain the broader grassroots experience.

Dr Geh confesses she was 'ambivalent' initially and needed to be convinced that she could be 'more effective in Parliament than out of it'.

What clinched it was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech: 'He really came across as sincere in promoting a more open society. That was a catalyst that made up my mind.'

Even then, her optimism is tempered.

While society's hopes have been raised, she cautions that the Government must handle this correctly.

'Let's face it, the Government is still very strong. I mean, it's still a banyan tree. But if the Government tries to take over civil society... and prescribes it according to its blueprint, that is not going to be beneficial in the long term,' she says.

Why? It would incur a backlash of cynicism and repel the very diversity of talents and voices it seeks.

• **What are some specific environmental issues you will raise?**

Protection of our marine areas. We don't have as much as Indonesia or the Philippines but what we have in terms of diversity of corals is five times that of the Caribbean and 25 times the Mediterranean.

But this is not being protected in any systematic way. None of our marine areas is a designated nature reserve. Instead the priorities are shipping, the port, land reclamation and now using the sea as a landfill. All this is important but it should not be done at the expense of our marine biodiversity.

• **What about non-environmental issues?**

I'm of course interested in gender issues, although I think these have become, shall we say, mainstream, in that a lot of the gender issues brought up by former NMPs have now been incorporated into government policy.

Education and health issues, and also the arts. But I don't have any fixed agenda. To me, the process of strengthening civil society is in a way more important than the issues per se.

It's like education. A good education system will stimulate the desire to learn and enable the pupil to continue learning.

It's the same with civil society. It's the process of validating the individual voice, letting people feel that they have something worth saying and that they can contribute.

• **How would you describe the state of civil society?**

A couple of decades ago, fear prevented people from speaking up. Then later, it was apathy. But we are in a very interesting time now, because PM Lee seems to want to be even more open and consultative in his style of government.

So I would say that we are now moving to a more optimistic, even participatory mode. Look at the number of people who submitted their names for the NMP exercise. That's a sign people feel it's worth making an effort, that they can contribute.

• **Where would you like to see civil society five or 10 years down the road?**

To me, the signs of a healthy civil society would be one where you do not have clear demarcations between the three Ps (people, public and private).

For instance, the private sector, instead of targeting just economic goals, should also incorporate more social responsibility.

There'll also be less distinction between people's personal space and social space.

I mean if someone went and dropped rubbish in your home, you would either pick it up yourself, even though you didn't drop it, or you would ask him to please refrain from dropping it, right? If people could extend that sense of ownership to a public space, that would be a clear sign.

• **There are people who feel that NMPs do not have the stomach for the rough and tumble of real politics in winning votes.**

I am aware of that criticism, and I must say I partially agree which is why I didn't come in earlier. But past NMPs have shown that the nominated position is not a purely nominal one.

I keep reminding myself that I am not representing my own personal views or pushing narrow interests, that I must represent as large a section of people as possible.

A constituency can consist of people who hold the same values or feel strongly about a particular issue. So I will do my best to make it as large as possible.

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