

# Contact

THE TEACHERS' DIGEST

A NEW  
LOOK,  
A FRESH  
START



Issue

01

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In this issue of *Contact*, you will meet eleven individuals who show what it means to explore new trails off the beaten track inside and outside the classroom. Forget blind optimism or jaded cynicism. These teachers, parents and students have their eyes fixed on realities but have a passion to forge new ones.

While achieving academic excellence, pursuing interests, or helping those in school and in the larger community, these eleven have produced a host of supporters and beneficiaries. Their accomplishments thus far will make you sit up and rethink what is happening within and without our schools.

As you start this New Year, may these real life examples also inspire you to look further into the horizon, and perhaps see you take the first step to new pursuits and successes!

## *Our Inspiring Individuals...*



### CONTACT US

*Contact – The Teachers' Digest* is a quarterly publication giving teachers in-depth appreciation of key MOE initiatives and policies. It supplements our fortnightly online edition of *Contact* which focuses on the latest news and views.

We welcome your comments and contributions. Please write to us at: [contact\\_online@moe.edu.sg](mailto:contact_online@moe.edu.sg)

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# Sharing Lessons in *Literature & Life*

In the film *'Dead Poets Society'*, English professor John Keating (played by actor Robin Williams) stirs up his students' interest in literature and poetry. Though if fiction is inspired by fact, then the life story of Literature teacher Rosalind Gurupatham could have been made into an art house hit. Affectionately known as 'Ms G' to her students, the Serangoon Junior College (SRJC) teacher has been a source of inspiration for the past 26 years of her teaching life.



“It may be a cliché, but Literature is all about life. It is about the self and one’s place in the greater scheme of things. It creates an awareness of how to live one’s life right.”

*Former student Tammy Thiang and now fellow colleague of Ms G, says she was inspired by Ms G’s teachings during her days at SRJC.*



The daughter of an avid reader, Rosalind developed a passion for reading at an early age. Her father would specially order novels and short stories from overseas for both Rosalind and her sister. It was this special love for books that made Rosalind appreciate the value of Literature in the school’s curriculum. Just as the lives of Keating’s students were changed through their passion for poetry, Rosalind is an advocate of the lessons that Literature can bring to life.

She explains, “It may be a cliché, but Literature is all about life. It is about the self and one’s place in the greater scheme of things. It creates an awareness of how to live one’s life right.” It is a cliché that Rosalind has applied in her role as a teacher and friend to her students.

Recalls Tammy Thiang, her former student turned colleague in SRJC, “From my days as her student, I have learnt to see the value of taking time out from studying the text to teach from real life experiences, as well as to share some of my personal experiences with my students. I think telling them what I have learnt in my life journey and relating it back to the text can help them see the relevance of Literature in their lives.”

Always one to practise innovation and creativity, Rosalind is constantly challenging herself to grow and to “move with the times”. Hence her ‘out-of-the-box’ methods in engaging and challenging her students. From rapping Shakespeare to staring at the night sky for poetic inspiration and from reading in the sports gallery to staring at animals in the zoo in order to appreciate a little of Ted Hughes’ animal imagery, she has done them all with her students.

Having met Ms G a few times at focus group and feedback meetings as well as at one Pre-U seminar, Dr Elizabeth Pang, from MOE’s Curriculum Planning & Development Division, describes Ms G as a legendary Literature teacher. Ms G’s reputation is truly no tall tale. She has helped nurture an Angus Ross winner and has four ex-students follow in her footsteps to pursue a teaching career in SRJC.

While she modestly dismisses the compliment, crediting the Angus Ross winner Paul Khoo as “an exceptional student, capable and very humble” and her colleague, Mr Stephen Burrows, in helping her to inspire their students to give their best, there is no denying that Rosalind is indeed a champion in her vocation.

Rosalind is also a hero in her personal life journey. Although having had to battle with cancer for the past 10 years, she continues to live life to the fullest. This includes giving everything she has in every task she undertakes. “I do believe that in everything you do, you leave a little of yourself behind. Some of the most memorable moments I have treasured in teaching were those times I worked closely with the students in literary concerts. My illness has not allowed me to play an active role, but some of my students have pursued their passion by joining theatre companies.”

In Rosalind’s opinion, teaching is not just a job. It is also her life’s calling. When asked what vocation she would be doing if she was not a teacher, she replies without missing a beat, “My name is my vocation. Gurupatham means ‘in the footsteps of the teacher’. I really can’t think of doing anything else.”

That is why when it comes to her career, passion and life, Rosalind feels that they are all one and the same. **“The magic of literature lies in the fluidity of language. A Chinese philosopher once said that water is fluid and soft. But bit by bit, water can cut through rock. So be fluid. Cut rock. Live!”**



# from PET PASSION to EQUINE EXCELLENCE

As students are encouraged to pursue their interests, some have ventured into less common endeavours. 15-year-old Chew Yi Jun, is an example as she lives out her childhood dream of horse-riding. *Contact* gets into the saddle with this rider and finds out what spurs her on.



**S**t. Nicholas Girls' School student, Yi Jun, is a sporty young lady by nature. Mention her primary sport, horse-riding, and she brightens up, a radiance born from a deep-seated passion and love for horses.

It all began six years ago when her parents, realising her interest in horses, showed her an article about a riding centre on Sentosa. She started taking lessons and, six years later, Yi Jun is now a confident horsewoman. The journey, however, hasn't always been smooth riding.

"I broke my left arm when I was about 11," reveals Yi Jun, matter-of-factly. "I was riding my horse around the field and a soccer ball was kicked nearby, freaking him out. He reared up and I fell off."

Taking this setback in her stride, Yi Jun has gone on to attain the Elementary grade in horse-riding. Not only that, but she was ranked third in the recently held FEI World Dressage Challenge, Novice B Test, held in Thailand.

Congratulate her on her accomplishment, however, and she looks shy, dismissing it with unusual modesty for a teenager. You see, she would sooner talk about her beloved horses.



"I have two horses, one in Singapore and one in Bangkok, and they're both Danish Warmbloods," she enthuses. "My horse in Singapore is named Amaretto; he's the cheekier and more spirited of the two. I use him for showjumping. Copper is in Bangkok. He's calmer and steadier, so I use him for dressage."

She shares this anecdote about Amaretto, of whom she's obviously fond. "Once, I was riding him and I was going to take him around this jump that was quite high. Instead, he took the jump; and without any problem. I felt rather touched that he did so, although he did it without my intention, and experienced quite a high."

Yi Jun dreams of riding someday on an Arabian or Morgan, as she finds them more foreign and exotic. However, she remains faithful to her Danish Warmbloods for competitions, as they are more stable and easier to handle, thus giving her more confidence.

"I once had a bad competition at the Preliminary level," she confides, "which gave me a mental block as the jumps were higher than I was used to. Immediately after the competition, I went to Amaretto's stable and he just nuzzled me, instead of being cheeky as usual. It shows he understood."

With practice and more practice, Yi Jun overcame that bad competition. While others may put it down as mere hard work, those who know her personally beg to differ. Says Theresa Ho, Yi Jun's Mathematics teacher, "She is very passionate about the things she undertakes, and her commitment to horse-riding is an example." A character trait that will no doubt see her adding more trophies to her already burgeoning collection.

Yi Jun has benefited in other ways from her passion for horses and horse-riding. Showing the same level of discipline in her studies as she does in her horse-riding, Yi Jun also excels in school. "Yi Jun has a flair for English and Literature...she represented her class in the interclass persuasive speech competition and took part in a series of Poetry Slam workshops," reveals Theresa.

**“Yi Jun’s teachers and peers are updated on her latest achievements in the sport. They also help her keep pace in her academic life.”**

Her passion and excellence in and out of school has not gone unnoticed. Her Principal Mrs Helen Choo invited Yi Jun to share about her life as a competitive sportswoman at an assembly period last July. In this way, Yi Jun's teachers and peers are updated on her latest achievements in the sport. They also help her keep pace in her academic life. Theresa gave the lass her personal mobile number and revision notes

ahead of time knowing that she would be missing some Maths lessons. She says, "We all try to help her out wherever possible. Even her classmates, who are extremely interested in what she does, take notes for her whenever she has to go out of the country for training sessions or competitions."

For those who are thinking of working with horses, Yi Jun has this piece of advice to offer: "Love horses. Connection and passion are also important."

"Horse-riding, even working with horses, is not without risk," she says, "But it is extremely satisfying. Not only is it beneficial as a sport, because of the fitness factor, but it also cultivates perseverance and tenacity. And, you learn to respect horses and animals."

***We wish this talented horse-rider well in all her future endeavours, equine or otherwise.***





# Steel-willed ironman with heart *of* gold

Koh Suan Lam—teacher, husband, father, friend, sportsman. Popular among his students for his firm but friendly approach, the Discipline Committee Head faced his own discipline challenge on 3 December 2006, when he took on the gruelling Ironman Triathlon in Western Australia.

**A**rriving early for the interview at Kent Ridge Secondary School (KRSS), I am greeted at the foyer personally by Suan Lam. As Head of Physical Education and Co-Curricular Activities, he is outfitted in a sports tee, running shorts and sneakers. This reveals a well-muscled, nicely toned body on a 33-year-old lanky frame.

This evident interest in sports was something that Suan Lam has had since a young age. In fact, he admits with a chuckle that, even as a young child, he always read the Sports Page first.

This avid interest was to develop into a drive for sporting excellence in his adolescent years. The alumnus of Tanglin Technical School

was active in his school's badminton, basketball, cross-country and track & field teams. His personal best then was a flat seven minutes for a 2.2km run.

Suan Lam realised his childhood dream when he took on the highly demanding Ironman Triathlon in Western Australia in December 2006.

On his decision to become a teacher, he says, "I see sports as a stepping stone to other aspects of life. Like a healthy body, for one. And as a physical education teacher, I can impart the knowledge and skills of various sports to many."

At the end of the day, Suan Lam is a sportsman at heart. When asked whether he would prefer to win Teacher or Sportsman of the Year, he only had to think for a moment before decisively choosing the latter.

"I would prefer winning Sportsman of the Year. Then I can continue to promote sports, fitness and health," he laughs. "I can also personify KRSS' vision, Heart of a Saint, Passion of an Inventor, Will of an Olympian, in order to build character in my students."

This stoic sports teacher is a firm believer in values and discipline. After a road accident in August 2006, he took only one of the seven days' medical leave given, so as not to neglect his duties in school.

While this tenacity may lead others to brand him as a tough nut, especially in his position as acting Discipline Head, Suan Lam, is obviously well-liked among students and peers. There are frequent interruptions during the interview, and he greets all warmly. It is evident that this is not your run-of-the-mill much-feared teacher.

"Mr Koh is a man of principle," past student Edmund Tan, 18, states with conviction. "Although he can be strict during training, he is your friend outside." Student Ivan Xu, 16, agrees, saying "he is a serious but caring teacher." But perhaps past students Elless Tan and Seo Kwee Mei sum it up best when they reveal that everyone knows Mr Koh. A popular man, indeed.

But maybe that's because Suan Lam constantly pushes the limits of his students, while developing them as young adults. While personal growth is important, for him the courage to take up the challenge is what matters most.

"It's all about analysing your decision and its problems; yet being bold enough to go through with it anyway," he says soberly. "I constantly challenge myself to leave my comfort zone and go 'beyond frontiers' which is KRSS' motto, incidentally; and I hope to inspire others to do the same."

While Suan Lam is no racing freshman (he has run four marathons since 1996), the Ironman Triathlon is only his second competitive triathlon. And having never been formally taught how to swim until a few years ago, he admits that he approached the swimming segment, the first leg of the triathlon, with much dread. Suan Lam eventually completed the Ironman with a timing of 14:55:48, despite having fallen sick three days before the race.

This drives home the message that he would like to give his students, "Live your life to the fullest and fulfil your dreams. And start with the end in mind."

**"I see sports as a stepping stone to other aspects of life. Like a healthy body, for one. And as a physical education teacher, I can impart the knowledge and skills of various sports to many."**

## ABOUT THE IRONMAN TRIATHLON

The Ironman Triathlon was held in Busselton, Western Australia on 3 December 2006. It consisted of:

- 3.8**km swim
- 180**km bicycle ride
- 42.2**km marathon

**These had to be completed in 17 hours.** To get a perspective on the distances involved, it is hard for some to run 2.4km, let alone swim 3.8km in the open sea. Imagine cycling from Changi Airport to Tuas and back. Now do it all over again before cycling again to Sentosa. That's roughly how long 180km is. And finally, top it all off with a full marathon!



# A HELPING HAND

of

## HUMANITY, HONESTY AND HUMILITY

16-year-old Veerasingam Kalicharan, otherwise known as Kali, is an introverted teenager who leads a hectic life in and out of the classroom. Besides being the school ace (Kali has topped his cohort for two consecutive years), he is a member of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, plays for a traditional Indian Orchestra and sits on the school's prefectorial board. However, it isn't his academic or CCA achievements that make Kali different from the average schoolboy. As part of his community service with the Kampong Chai Chee Sunlove Home, Kali tutors underprivileged students every week. Recently, *Contact* met with the young achiever, to find out what inspires him to go the extra mile for the less fortunate.



**Kali's life is filled with school activities, community work and of course, good friends and family.**

*(From left to right) With dreams of being a surgeon one day, Kali gets a firm foundation in life saving techniques as a member of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. Kali with his Junior Patrician award, given by his school in recognition for his community work. Kali with Ms Karen Pereira, his Sec 1 form teacher, whom he credits as a source of support and counsel.*



**CONTACT: How did you get involved with Sunlove?**

**Kali:** My mother volunteered her culinary skills there, so that's how my brother and I knew about the place. Although my younger brother started volunteering later, he has been an inspiration to me. Through his example, I've learnt to constantly appreciate the value of helping others. Today, just watching him teach the kids roller-blading has motivated me to keep going on.

**CONTACT: It seems satisfying to be doing community service, but what are the challenges and issues you faced during your involvement?**

**Kali:** Of course, juggling schoolwork, CCAs and my time at Sunlove has not been easy. I teach the kids at Sunlove only once a week, but my schedule has still been quite hectic. In the past, Sunlove gave me a few weeks off to revise for my exams. I guess I'm quite fortunate in that sense. Apart from my work here, I am also taking part in overseas projects.

In December 2006, I was one of the three prefects chosen by the school to participate in the Malaysian La Sallian Leadership Conference. The objective of the meeting was to spread the La Sallian mission of helping the needy.

I will also be going to Myanmar this year with Sunlove. I am not sure about the exact nature of our work but, for now, we have to prepare second-hand items such as toys and clothing, for the children there.

**CONTACT: How has the school helped to support or encourage you in your passion for community service?**

**Kali:** All the teachers and pastoral staff at St. Patrick's school have given me immense support and encouragement for my community service. The teachers in school do expect a lot more from me, especially when the exams are near. However, they have always been open to any problems and challenges that I might encounter. For example, Ms Karen Pereira, who was my form teacher in Secondary 1, continues to offer advice regarding my life in and out of school.

**CONTACT: Seeing your passion for community service, do you actually see yourself becoming a full-time social worker?**

**Kali:** Well, not exactly. My ambition is to become a doctor, and I hope to be able to work as a surgeon after my studies. Even as a doctor, I do see myself giving my time and effort to the community. For example, offering treatment to impoverished people in the community. I want to make community service a part of my life no matter what job I'm holding in the future.

**CONTACT: You've won a Junior Patrician award for your community service. What are some suggestions you can offer to encourage community service in Singapore?**

**Kali:** I feel that the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) in schools should be made compulsory for all students. It used to be only an incentive for students to get better grades but it is not a necessity for them. Giving tuition to the kids is very different from just making donations to the organisation because tuition gives a more hands-on experience.

But there are other ways of getting involved. For instance, for my Myanmar trip, I'm planning to get my schoolmates to contribute their unwanted items. So that through me, they too can do their part in helping the community.

**CONTACT: If there was a quote you could use to inspire others, what would it be?**

**Kali [Pauses to reflect on the question]:** That would be Sunlove's motto 'Help ever, hurt never'. That is how I want to live my life too.



*PALs and their children, all geared up and ready to answer the call for help for whenever or whatever needs to be done.*

**CONTACT: Of all the organisations and activities available, why did you choose PALs?**

**Mdm Waheeda:** When I first volunteered, PALs had not been formed so we helped out as and when the teachers requested. I felt it was a good opportunity to learn about the school, the teachers and its system. As I went along, I found there were other things I could contribute as a parent, like helping the teachers and other pupils.

(In fact, Mdm Waheeda is more than just a regular 'contributor' to PALs. Since its inception, she has performed the role of Chairperson for three years and stepped down midway through her second term in 2006 as she wanted "to make way for new leaders with new and fresh ideas".)

**CONTACT: Is that why you have remained in PALs although your children have graduated?**

**Mdm Waheeda:** Yes, I chose to stay on because I feel I can still contribute. Even though my daughter has moved on to her Secondary school four years ago and my son just two years ago; I think I can still play a part here. Also, my children gave me their blessings to continue to serve in PALs!

**CONTACT: Can you share one particular programme PALs introduced that is close to your heart?**

**Mdm Waheeda:** One of the most recent programmes we introduced is the HELP programme, where we take care of 'latch key' kids during after-school hours.

This programme caters for a selected group of students from both Primary 4 and 5. Some of them have the keys to the house but there's nobody at home. Others don't have the keys to the house so they have to hang around till someone gets home.

We grouped them together and created a special 'course' for them. Every week we teach them something new like sewing buttons on their clothes, making sandwiches and hot drinks, and we even have open discussions on topics like peer pressure and friends.

They not only learn something new all the time, but are kept occupied in meaningful activities instead of loitering around.



# A PAL

## of the School

*Mdm Waheeda is not a teacher or a staff of East View Primary. Yes, she's on a first name basis with the teachers, and pupils greet her when she walks around the school. That's because Mdm Waheeda is 'PALs' with the school. In the school's lingo, PALs means Parents As Leaders—the parent support group that Mdm Waheeda continues to serve in, long after her children have left the school.*

**CONTACT: Has there been a particular pupil in HELP who has touched your heart?**

**Mdm Waheeda:** There's one boy who, when he first came in, exhibited disruptive behaviour. To me, it was his way of getting attention but in the wrong way. So I made it a point to only shower him with attention when he did something good, even if it was a small thing. Whenever he did something wrong, I would ignore him.

Another thing I did was to treat him as "my child for the day". I love to hold my children's hands so I would hold his hand and of course, he would be really shy about it. But I would tell him, "Oh, you're my child for today." It was a way of showing him that someone cared.

Although it took a while, he has changed for the better and even his teachers have noticed the change.

**CONTACT: You're lauded for your success in rounding up housewives to become members. Can you tell us your secret?**

**Mdm Waheeda:** I just talk to them while waiting for our children or during school events. Most of the time, housewives are just unsure about how they can contribute. But my belief is this, everyone can contribute. I tell them, "Why don't you try helping out at our recess programme. It's like looking after your children, except you have to take care of more children."

Once they try it out and see how easy it is, they volunteer in other activities. Then you slowly give them more things to do so they'll have the confidence to do more. Most importantly, once they get involved, they bring their friends!

We're fortunate that the school is always supportive of us and constantly express their appreciation for the work we do. It makes us really happy and want to contribute even more because we know we can play a part in the school and make a difference.



*Mdm Waheeda and her fellow PALs displaying some of the handmade paper boxes made during the handicraft sessions with their HELP pupils.*

# CHAMPIONING ART IN THE COMMUNITY

Walk one mile in Ruth Ng Lee Gek's shoes and you would need two pairs to make the journey—because of her crutches. The Commonwealth Secondary Art Coordinator was struck with polio when she was three years old. However, this hasn't stopped the visionary from single-handedly transforming her school into an Arts centre for the West. Ruth has won the MOE Outstanding Contribution Award (Individual) twice in the School's Best Practice category, and conducted 17 sharing sessions on the school's art trail to the community in 2006 alone.



**CONTACT: You are well-known for infusing art in the community. Can you give us some examples?**

**Ruth [laughing]:** Well, I was honoured when the People's Association approached me in 2002, to paint a mural for their mobile rock-climbing wall. They'd seen our walk-in art gallery which I had pioneered for my school since 1993. I had my students paint on stickers to create the mural.

In 2003, the NDP Commander asked us to beautify the National Stadium driveway hoardings. My students and I created 150 mural designs within three months. This made art come alive for the students and the community.

And in 2004, well-known NIE lecturer, Dr Low Guat Tin, requested a design that could be replicated into a series of collaterals like notebooks and more. She distributed these to participants of her seminars.

(As a matter of fact, Ruth's personal touches can be seen all over the school's premises. The moment one walks into Commonwealth Secondary, one would be immersed in a sea of vibrant colours in the form of her students' art works in larger-than-life dimensions. It's a sensual experience that makes the school look more like an art gallery than a Secondary school.)

**CONTACT: Your school looks like one big walk-in art gallery ...**

**Ruth:** I believe Art belongs to the community, not just the classroom. My premise, "Art must be seen, talked about, enjoyed by the community", is my motto to bring art to the community.

In fact, my first mission here was to build an art gallery for the school's population. So anywhere in school, they would experience and admire art—nothing beats the applause of one's fellow students.

Much credit must also go to all my school's principals over the last 15 years. Their wholehearted support for the walk-in art gallery has helped to create this distinctive visual heritage.

(While Ruth goes through her slides showcasing the school's achievements in art, she pauses at a particular photo showing an unusually petite and mature-looking male student standing proudly on a chair beside a huge wall mural. She pauses poignantly before sharing the story of Robin Lek, a student who remained an inspiration to her since she met him 13 years ago.)

**Ruth:** I'm very pleased with my students from the Chinese High School's Art Elective Programme, which I pioneered in the 1980s, because they are influencing others in the local visual art education field.

Also, I would like to mention Robin Lek of Commonwealth Secondary. This ex-student did the mural hanging outside my studio.

Due to muscular dystrophy, he was unable to hold a brush for painting. But when I saw that he could draw with a metallic pen, I advised him to develop his drawings into a design, and to compose the many small designs into a mural painting for his 'O' Level Art examination in 1994. With just one tool and his ability, he diligently experimented, designed and produced the school's most inspiring mural yet.

Robin's 8'x4' mural was completed single-handedly within three months. To date, no other able-bodied student has beaten this record.

Robin Lek was a legacy; sadly he passed away a few years afterward. His success proved that if I could get a student to succeed in one thing very well, he could succeed in anything else he chose to work on.

**CONTACT: Do you think you have succeeded in your personal quest of bringing visual arts to the community?**

**Ruth:** Have you noticed how fast an ant appears when you leave sugar lying around? It does not take an ant or many ants much time to move all that sugar back to the nest. Similarly, we will succeed beyond our expectations if we persevere diligently.

For instance, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve invited me in 2001 to tile the ceilings of four mangrove boardwalk shelters. For the past six years, the entire Lower Secondary students did this, producing 1200 mural tiles a year. I feel that my vision to get the masses to experience and enjoy art *personally* has been fulfilled.

**CONTACT: How do you nurture your own love for Art?**

**Ruth:** Besides enjoying God's creation in nature, seeing the real works of the Masters is a great treat for me. I travelled all over the world to see great masterpieces, including works by Claude Monet, Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Picasso. Seeing their works is a glimpse into infinity and eternity. It brings tears of joy to my eyes, stirring my heart to paint again. After each visit, I fly home more than refreshed!

# TO BE A CHILD

by Carolyn Scott

To be a child  
Is to see silver in the sea  
And gold in everything.  
To cry and feel no pain.  
To have no past  
And see the future in a day  
To paint bright pictures of dull scenes  
And see the sun shining in a puddle.  
To ask all the time  
And yet be sure of everything.

A poem that Ruth first came across in the 70s, and which has remained her favourite over the years.

*A pensive Ruth reflecting on the work done by Robin Lek, an ex-student who inspired her with his diligent spirit.*



A close-up portrait of Mr. R. Gunasekaran, a middle-aged man with a mustache, wearing a light blue shirt and a red tie. He is looking slightly to the left with a gentle smile. The background is blurred, showing a sign that says "PIONEER".

## Parent at Home, *Leader in School*

Like many parents today, Mr R. Gunasekaran aka Mr Guna, leads a full life filled with work, family and school. By day, Mr Guna is a Senior Technician in the Maintenance department of an MNC. His nights are spent either attending classes at the Singapore Polytechnic or with his family. However, school does not consist merely of night classes at the polytechnic but also Pioneer Secondary School where Mr Guna serves as the President of the Parents' Association.

**F**or some, dividing time between work, night courses and family is a juggling act in itself. Not so for Mr Guna, who derives great satisfaction from his work as the President of the Pioneer Parents' Association (PPA). As a devoted father (his daughter attends Pioneer Secondary), he is encouraged by seeing parents get involved in their children's lives. "Although I have very little time, the thought of doing something useful motivates me a lot. I strongly believe that parents can play a greater role in nurturing their children, and teaming up with schools is just one way to do that."

In fact, Principal of Pioneer Secondary, Mr N. Satianathan, commends him for "working tirelessly in many projects to bring the school to greater heights." Working as a team with the school, Mr Guna and his dynamic committee raised more than \$10,000 in 2006 alone for the school's needy students. Crediting his fellow teammates, he says, "We could not have done it without the varied talents in the PPA. This includes our homemaker members who contributed significantly by cooking up a storm and setting up stalls during special school occasions to help raise funds."



As President of PPA, one of Mr Guna's most crucial and sensitive tasks is to strike a balance between the parents' requests, and the needs of students and teachers. Still, Mr Guna believes that effective communication between teacher and parent is productive for the child's academic development. He affirms that for the parent-school partnership to benefit all concerned, one needs to be clear about the differences in expectations and views. Mr Guna stresses that "the objective of parents joining the PPA is to collaborate with the staff to support the school programmes."

He is also thankful for the school's support and praises the Principal and staff for being approachable and accommodating to PPA's needs. Apart from giving advice, the school has even helped out in some of the association's projects. For example, for PPA's recent Community Involvement Programme project, teachers and parents banded together on a Saturday morning to collect old clothing and newspapers from neighbouring flats.

Notwithstanding PPA's successes, Mr Guna objectively points out that getting parents to participate in their projects remains a pertinent challenge. He explains, "We need to show parents that their participation in PPA is beneficial for the child. When I came forward to join PPA, my child saw the interest I have taken in getting to know her school."

Mr Guna is constantly busy working on new projects for the PPA. "At this moment, we are thinking of how to help this family whose child (a Pioneer student) was suddenly diagnosed with a lifelong illness. The family certainly needs our support, both financially and emotionally." Even as Mr Guna and his PPA committee continue to carry out their exciting plans for the new year—including the 'MegaCarnival', a fundraising event for needy pupils, reaching out to families whose children are at-risk of dropping out from school, parenting talks by well-known speakers and many others—they remain focused on one purpose.

**"We must come together with the understanding that all of us, teachers and parents, are involved and work for the sake of our children's development. A successful PPA will have members who are willing to contribute and are committed to our children's learning."**

An insightful thought illustrating the fact that even as schools today cannot do without dedicated teachers and modern facilities, they also cannot do without a straight-A parent like Mr Guna. So if you are a parent, just remember that it is never too late to go back to school.

“Although I have very little time, the thought of doing something useful motivates me a lot. I strongly believe that parents can play a greater role in nurturing their children, and teaming up with schools is just one way to do that.”



*Working hard to better the lives of the less fortunate students in Pioneer Secondary are Mr Guna (top centre, in white shirt and red tie) and his fellow teammates of the Parents' Association (on the left), with strong support from the school, including Principal Mr N. Satianathan (top right, blue shirt and red striped tie) and a teacher.*

# Bettering Lives *with* Education

For Victor Lim Fei, teaching is important in helping others acquire knowledge. However, the buck does not stop here for Victor. Simultaneously Level Head and School Staff Developer Subject Head at Jurong Junior College (JJC), he is not content with confining his work to the classroom. Instead, Victor regularly jets about different countries to present papers ranging from applied linguistics to pedagogy that he has developed from his university days. Recently *Contact* had a chance to speak with Victor and find out what keeps him going...

“I was really inspired by someone who told me that the world is only changed by tired people, those who max out their days and work hard. Since then, I was really convicted to work hard and make the most out of everyday. It is amazing just how much you can accomplish if you discipline yourself and focus on the task at hand,” reflects Victor. He should know, as someone who wears many hats. Apart from being a member of JJC’s corporate communications department, Victor spends his free time conducting research on language and educational applications and is an active volunteer both in church and in the community.

His secret to succeeding in the different areas of his life is simple. Victor shares, “I maximise my time by cutting away time-wasters...[these] refer to time loss as a result of bad planning, indecisiveness and flawed prioritising.” Just when you wonder if he has time for loved ones and friends, Victor points out that his wife, Yvonne, is the one who keeps him going when the going gets tough and affectionately calls her his “best cheerleader”.

“The students were engaged in learning ... because there was such a tremendous drive and motivation within them as they understood that education was the only way that could cause them to rise beyond their circumstances and create a better life for themselves.”



Victor and his wife Yvonne with their labour of love—pages from a picture book for children illustrated by her and written by him.

He is also grateful for the support he has received from his colleagues whom he credits for being a great source of help in his ‘jet-setting’ academic mission. “My principal, Mr Koh Yong Chiah, and my HODs, Patricia and Mandy, have been very gracious and understanding especially in times when I have to go off to participate in conferences and overseas trips.”

To date, Victor has published around seven academic papers in books and conference publications and has another two papers in the submission stage. Other than learning from Mr Koh, whom Victor calls “a great mentor” and “an inspiring role model”, he also gets ideas and topics for his papers from other people. “I enjoy discussions with people who share the same passion and interests because I find myself intellectually stimulated from these conversations.”

In a similar manner, Victor hopes to stimulate society by sharing his papers. “Transformation in society, such as the provision of equal opportunities, empowerment of men and women and the elimination of systemic poverty can only take place via education,” says Victor. Citing the saying “Give a man a fish; you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime”, Victor hopes his efforts can contribute, in some way, to the betterment of society through education. He then shares the

story of one of his more memorable experiences during his travels, where he was tasked to be a judge for an English speaking competition for schools from China’s Yunnan province.

Revealing that students there had left an indelible impression on him, he reminisces, “The students were engaged in learning, not because of high-quality lessons or innovative pedagogy, but because there was such a tremendous drive and motivation within them as they understood that education was the only way that could cause them to rise beyond their circumstances and create a better life for themselves.”

Adding to his list of accomplishments, Victor has recently completed a project with his wife—a picture book for children, which they hope will be published soon. “The story is about a boy who likes to question ‘why’. We hope that this book will encourage younger people to challenge conventions with responsibility and the right attitude. This will bring about greater creativity and innovation.”

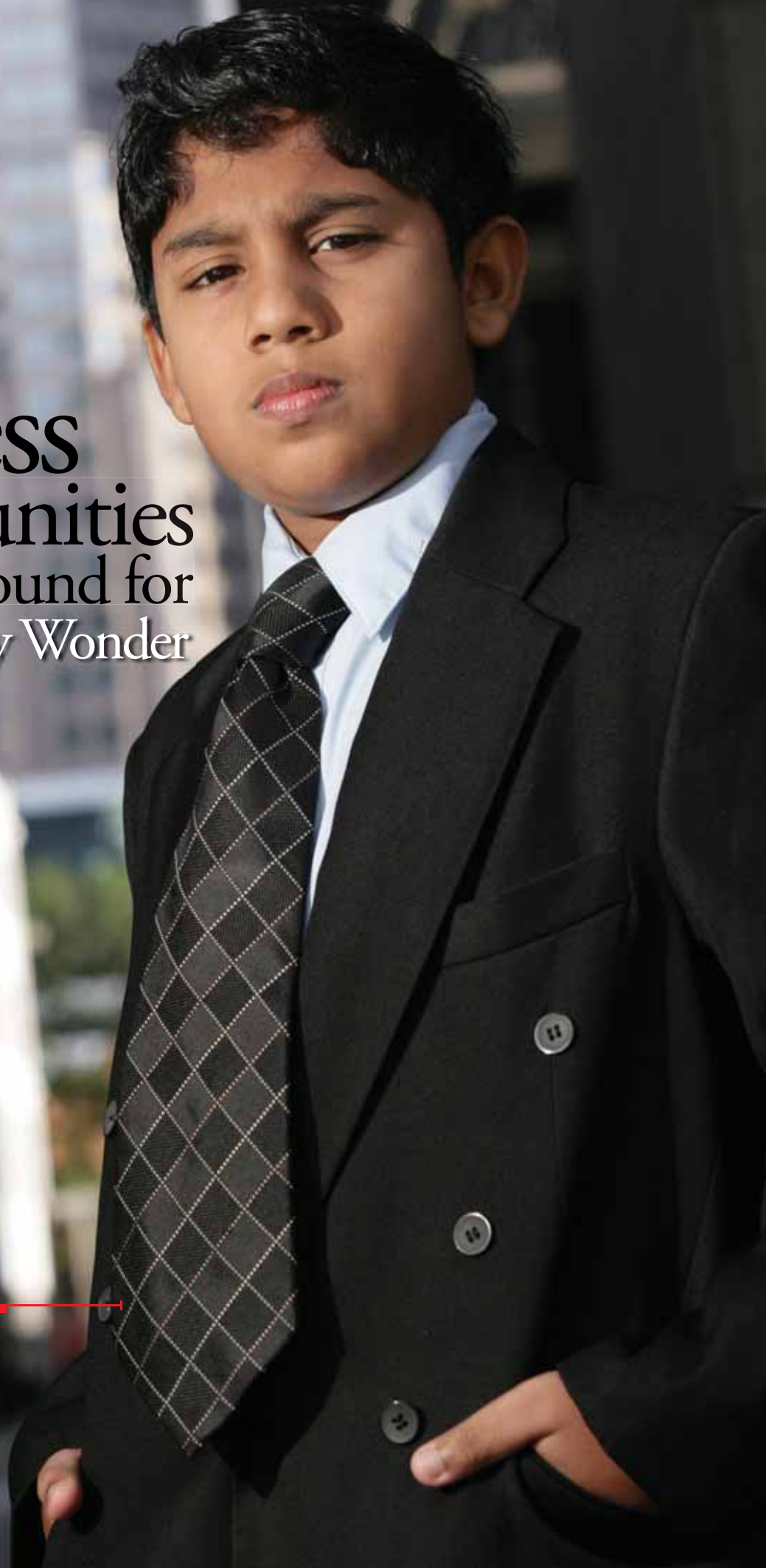
Just like the boy in his picture book, Victor believes in constant learning, exploring and giving because **“we are limited in life by the depth of our knowledge, the extent of our exposure and the content of our character.”** For Victor, this gives reason and meaning to all he does in life.



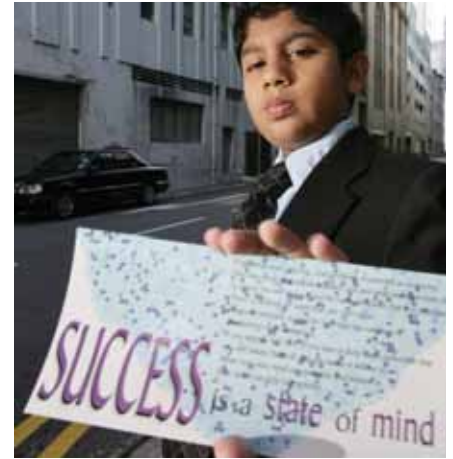
# Business Opportunities Abound for 9-Year-Old Boy Wonder

It seems the entrepreneurial spirit runs in Muhammad Ashik's blood. The son of Mr Abuayubul Ansari—a successful businessman who has won several entrepreneurial awards, including the Spirit of Enterprise 2005—Ashik wants to follow closely in his father's enterprising footsteps.

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**“I had to pay him back so he will continue to give me lots of opportunities. Or else he will be thinking, ‘If you can’t even return \$1000, how are you going to do business?’”**



**M**ore than making money for money's sake, Ashik wants to use money generated from his business to fund his medical studies and achieve billionaire status by the age of 19. Tall order? Not for this Zhangde Primary pupil who, at the tender age of nine, has already made \$4000 from his very first business venture.

It all started when Ashik received his Primary One examination results. Like any normal child, he asked his father for a present—an Xbox to be precise—as a reward. Like any normal father, Mr Ansari told Ashik he could buy anything he wanted, “but with his own money!” That incident sparked Ashik’s enterprising spirit and he hit upon the idea of creating and selling motivational postcards to earn his own money.

“I went to the Internet, found some motivational phrases, wrote them all on a piece of paper and got my auntie to design the postcards for me,” said Ashik. His father loaned him \$1000 to print 5000 postcards. Mr Ansari saw it as an investment in Ashik’s entrepreneurial education. “I wanted him to learn how to make his own money and also the value of money. I also made him sign a contract stating that he had to pay back this loan in 3 months’ time,” explained the owner

of a training company specialising in student entrepreneurship and financial literacy programmes.

The contract motivated Ashik to make his business a success so that he could prove to his father his commitment to the venture. “I had to pay him back so he will continue to give me lots of opportunities. Or else he will be thinking, ‘If you can’t even return \$1000, how are you going to do business?’”

Printed postcards in hand, Ashik approached strangers on the streets to make the sales. After his first fruitless afternoon, he was demoralised and sat down to think. “I wanted to quit but I thought ‘We had spent \$1000 and I could not just waste my time.’ So I started work again.” This time, Ashik managed to sell \$15 dollars worth of postcards and learned a practical business lesson in the process. He revealed, “At first I sold a packet of 10 postcards for \$5, but I realised that people didn’t really want to buy one packet. So I decided to sell one postcard at \$0.50 each and this idea worked.”

Ashik repaid his loan on time and has since given the \$4000 profit earned thus far to his father for safekeeping. Mr Ansari commented, “By the time he paid me back, he had no desire to buy anything else.” A fact that Ashik affirmed happily, “I did not even spend a

single dollar from the \$4000 because I want to save it to become a doctor. I do not want to trouble my parents by asking them for money for my education.”

Not content to rest on his laurels, Ashik has several plans lined up for next year. For one, Ashik’s Principal, Mrs Jaswant Sroya, has invited Ashik to give assembly talks next year. “I have given Ashik four 20-minute assembly periods to do a motivational talk. He said he will select 2 of his postcards containing phrases aligned with the school’s values of GIVE: Graciousness, Integrity, Versatility and Excellence, and expound on them.”

As Ashik wants to start preparing for the PSLE (this exemplary student topped his class in Primary 2 and 3), he is thinking of conducting his business differently. “I have come up with ‘Project Ashik’ where I will buy stands in shops to display and sell my postcards.” Although Ashik was turned down by the two shops he approached so far, he asserted, “If the shop I approach says no, never mind, there are many other shops in Singapore.”

**A winning attitude that will no doubt see many doors opening for Ashik in his quest to be a successful businessman.**

# *the* Teacher Champion *of the* Earth

The sun, the sand and the sea. That is where Doreen Tan Hui Koon spends her weekends and school holidays. Aside from a healthy tan at the end of the day, this Fengshan Primary teacher also winds up with a big bag of trash—from her day of cleaning up the rivers of Singapore that is. Meet Doreen, passionate environmentalist with the WaterWays Watch Society of Singapore (WWS), who brings her love for conservation into the classroom and her teaching skills into her work at WWS.





*Doreen and WWS volunteers collecting data on the waters of the Singapore River as reference material for the Public Utilities Board.*

“Looking at all the charts, if we don’t change our ways and continue to do exactly what we’re doing now, the planet cannot sustain us for the next hundred years. That’s why caring for the environment has to be the next big thing in this coming century.”

**S**elf-proclaimed indoor person, Doreen was motivated to act on her concern for the environment when her boyfriend, fellow primary school teacher Mohd Noh, brought her out on a river patrol. She witnessed firsthand the harmful effects of littering on the marine life and the river’s surroundings.

“I was concerned about the environment when I was a young kid. I even wrote poems on it but I didn’t know what I could do. It was only when I started seeing it for real—because when you look at books and videos, there’s a sense of detachment—that it really hit me and I became more passionate about the environment.”

She recalls the one time when they actually counted seven dead bloated carcasses of turtles (they do not pick up turtle carcasses as they might explode when handled). That was one particularly bad day. On other days, the river patrol have picked up an assortment of incongruous items such as school bags, tennis balls, shoes, and even a fallen lamppost near the vicinity of Raffles Place.

Currently in her fourth year with WWS, Doreen is very much involved in its other activities, especially in the education section which is responsible for organising educational talks and camps for the public, particularly children. Having helped out in five Camp Enviro-Awareness so far, Doreen feels that children really imbibe the values and appreciation for the

environment after being immersed in the camp’s activities and talks.

“You can see the change in their behaviour over the three days of the camp. For example, in the first day when they take their shower, you’ll see a lot of personal toiletries left around in the bathroom. Then as we continue to tell them about being responsible for their own things and litter, gradually over the days, we’ll see fewer ‘misplaced’ belongings lying around the place.” As Doreen puts it, being responsible for your own things and litter is the first small step towards caring for your surroundings and the environment.

Another personal pet passion for Doreen is recycling, and her strong stance against mindless wastage has affected the people around her. “Even my mum has started to separate the trash,” she declares.

Sharing more about her change in mindset, she tells of her days as a “poor art student” when she had to scavenge for materials to create 3D art pieces. “Previously I saw the usage of recycled materials for the purpose of creating art, but now it’s the other way round. I get the material first and then I think about what I can do with it.”

For her graduation show at the National Institute of Education (NIE), she did an art exhibition based on messages decrying ghost fishing—a term used for lost or abandoned fishing gear that continues to trap marine life in its deadly grasp. Plans for setting up an environmental CCA in her

school aside, she tries to inject a sense of environmental awareness into her lessons.

“From the very first day, I told my pupils to ensure that whenever they leave the classroom, they have to clean up all their litter.” During her art classes, pupils are encouraged to collect materials from their homes to use for their 3D projects. “You’ll be surprised to find that from your own home, you can actually collect way more than you can use, for example cereal and biscuit boxes, milk cartons, etc. And you can make wonderful things with these for art.”

As someone who walks the talk (Doreen tries to avoid eating from Styrofoam plates or boxes and is in the process of asking her school to switch to environmentally-friendly ones), she believes the word needs to get out before it’s too late. She earnestly believes that “water is to the earth like blood is to humans. Pollution is to the earth like cancer is to humans.”

“Looking at all the charts, if we don’t change our ways and continue to do exactly what we’re doing now, the planet cannot sustain us for the next hundred years. That’s why caring for the environment has to be the next big thing in this coming century.”

**If you are inspired by Doreen’s passion for the environment and would like to get involved in the “next big thing in this coming century”, check out [www.wws.org.sg](http://www.wws.org.sg).**

## ABOUT THE WATERWAYS WATCH SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE

The ‘Waterways Watch’ comprises an independent group of volunteers tasked to bring people together to monitor, restore and protect the aesthetics of Singapore’s waterways.



# TOYING WITH GREAT IDEAS

*Students in Mohammad Hafiz's Design and Technology (D&T) class are encouraged to play in class. That's because the 28-year-old Guangyang Secondary School teacher uses toys to engage and teach his D&T students.*

**F**rom using radio remote-controlled cars in Braddell Westlake Secondary School to Stikfas™ figurines in Guangyang Secondary School, Mohammad Hafiz has certainly added new dimensions to his D&T classes.

"The Design and Technology course is taught to a diverse range of attitudes and abilities," he explains. Sometimes, the normal mediums don't work, so I wanted to try and make it (D&T) more relevant to the students.

"I was trying to introduce the element of fun into my classroom," he chuckles. "And toys were the ideal medium in Design and Technology. I find that using a customised teaching method engages the students more."

Mohammad Hafiz has used Frisbees, air-pumped rocket launchers and remote-controlled UFOs in his class.

"The UFO is especially engaging," he reveals. "It is very helpful as it functions both as a teaching tool and an incentive: good students are rewarded by being given time to play with the UFO." Students are also told to bring in toys that they feel are well-designed, in order to help them better appreciate the importance of good design.

"Many students also do not see the importance of D&T," he adds. "They see it as a chore. With this new teaching method, my students are more involved; they are more immersed and, therefore, more interested as a result. They now see the significance of D&T. With greater motivation, they now put more effort into the subject."

In Guangyang Secondary School, Mohammad Hafiz uses Stikfas™ figurines as models on which his students can base their designs. By arranging and posing the figurines, transferring it onto the tablet PC and then projecting it for the class, the students are able to see more clearly the concept or idea he is trying to convey.

He admits that using tablet PCs and a one-on-one consultation process does open up the possibility of students goofing off. To solve this problem, he used the tablet PC itself as the solution. "I would project a particular student's problem onto a screen and then

invite the class to help find the solution. By using problems as a live example, I create what I call 'spontaneous IDEA-tion' for the class; everybody helps to solve it and everybody helps one another."

With a touch of pride, he cites the example of how one of his students used to be very quiet and unresponsive. Not only has Mohammad Hafiz's teaching methods helped his student to better express himself, but the student has also gone on to be shortlisted

for a national D&T Award. To him, this is just as noteworthy as the fact that other D&T teachers in Singapore have given him positive feedback on his teaching methods.

He has also, through national and cluster sharing with other D&T teachers, demonstrated how to use the tablet PC and Stikfas™ to teach this subject. However, he notes that using toys to teach is not a new concept. "After all," he says, "there are many toys with which one can teach Science."

That's why he also uses video as an educational tool. In 'Door Dilemma', a video his wife shot of him and their swinging glass door, he encouraged his students to find creative solutions for this potentially dangerous problem.

"My HOD wants a Japanese theme for 2007, so maybe we'll have a Japanese woman in a kimono to illustrate the kimono's intricate design complexities," he laughs.

Mohammad Hafiz is certainly a teacher who thinks outside the box and beyond the syllabus and he wants his students to do the same.

"I always tell them," he concludes, **"I give you wings, but it's up to you to create your own flight path."**

