

Presentation Transcript

Topic: It takes a village

Speaker: Yip Pin Xiu, Paralympian, Singapore & Theresa Goh, Former Paralympian, Singapore

Theresa: Hi, I'm Theresa Goh

Pin Xiu: And I'm Yip Pin Xiu.

Theresa: I am a Rio Paralympics bronze medallist, and I swam for 20 years before I retired in 2019.

Pin Xiu: Feels like a long time since then. I have been training for the past 17 years, I'm still current athlete. And, I'm a 3-time Paralympic gold medallist.

Theresa: I think both of us have a lot of experience in competitive swimming, but we also understand what it took to get here.

Theresa: And for us, we both are in agreement that it takes a village.

Pin Xiu: Yes, a village, everyone really our family, our friends, public service agencies, social service agencies, National Sports Association, swimming clubs, coaches, teams, a really, really big village.

Theresa: It is more than just swimming, it's a lot of behind the scenes but we will talk about all of that later on. And today, we just want to talk about our journey and all the people that were involved in it.

Pin Xiu: Yes.

Theresa: I was born much earlier, I was born with Spina Bifida, which basically in layman's terms means that my spine was affected, and I was unable to walk, and I still am unable to walk.

Pin Xiu: Yes, I can tell. I have Charcot-Marie-Tooth, it is a condition that causes my muscles to slowly deteriorate over time, because the signals are not being sent to your muscles. So, when I was born, I was born without a disability but only when I was around 2 years old, then it started onset. And at 5 years old, it got more serious. And when I was 13 years old, I started sitting on a wheelchair. It has just been deteriorating. It is a deteriorating condition.

Theresa: I think for us, even though it started out differently, I think the rest of the journey kind of ended up pretty similar. I think one of the things that really helped, like one of the similar things was that our families were both really supportive.

Pin Xiu: Yes. I was the third child, but my mom never like really coddled me even though I had a disability, whatever my brother had, I also grew up doing the same thing. If they went for piano classes, I went for piano classes. Until it got to tiring for my fingers to actually play. And so, they went for swimming lessons and I ended up having swimming lessons. And like I really loved the feeling. Loved the feeling of the water, I still love it. And being in a water, is like having that sense of freedom.

Theresa: Yeah, definitely. And I think that's one thing I think we can both agree on why we chose swimming was because, it gives us the amount of freedom that we have. I think being on a wheelchair there's a lot of physical boundaries, a lot of barriers that arise that we don't have control over. But once you're in the water, like wow, like you can go anywhere. I can go anywhere. And I think that's why I ended up choosing Swimming.

I don't think I chose swimming; I think swimming chose me. I don't think I'm good at any other sports but I'm not sure.

Theresa: Yeah, but we both started out, learning how to swim first, I think.

Pin Xiu: And, for me, it was like a family thing. For you too, right? So, I think it was pretty similar until the age where we started competitive swimming. So, how I started out was that I would go to the swimming pool every Sunday morning with my brothers. And then eventually, a volunteer from the Singapore Disability Sports Council spotted me. Now did you feel like I'm telling your story?

Theresa: I do feel like you're telling my story. It's very, very similar.

Pin Xiu: Yes, it is so similar. And we're just so fortunate, that like this happened, otherwise we would not be where we are today.

Theresa: Sports, I think, is one of the greatest vehicles for independence. I think it has allowed me to be independent, to be disciplined. It has allowed me to be the person I am today.

Theresa: So, like you said, we both kind of started swimming competitively about the same time, not the same time but the same age. I started when I was 12. You started when you were 12. It was a volunteer, from what was then known as, the Singapore Sports Council for the Disabled.

Pin Xiu: During my time at it was already Singapore Disability Sports Council.

Theresa: For me, the difference in experience was that I had experienced in both able-bodied squads and disabled Swimming squads. So, I have been in teams where all my teammates were able-bodied. And I've also been in teams where all my teammates are, like me disabled.

Pin Xiu: When I started at 12, Theresa was already 17 by then. She was like the big sister in the swimming pool, and she is a lot friendlier now. But last time she wasn't. Last time she was very cool.

Theresa: I am not cool now?

Pin Xiu: No, now you are very friendly,

Theresa: She was very noisy.

Pin Xiu: When I first went into the team, it was a new experience for me, because personally, I didn't grow up with other people with disabilities alongside me. There wasn't really representation in the media or in public. And I thought I was very alone. But seeing so many other people with disabilities in the team, I just felt that it's really limitless. Like, they can do everything that anybody else can do. So, after training, we also just go out and have fun and breakfast. And I think, that really showed me that I didn't have to put a limit on my disability, I could really do anything else that anybody else wanted to do, right?

Theresa: I think being a team with all disabled people is quite enabling.

Pin Xiu: And really, it was sports that showed us this way of life.

Both: Like we can do anything.

Pin Xiu: And I think, it's not just for people with disabilities, but also like able-bodied people, like just sports is really a life changer. Right? So, I've always been in a team with people of disabilities. Now currently, I swim aside the National Training Centre, in the OCBC Aquatic Centre. And it's also really fun because I think it's nice to be able to motivate each other and push each other on, even if it's a different programme. Also, like we talked about all these, like National NSAs and other agencies just now, but I think I also coach, swimming clubs, and everything has played a very, very big role in our success.

Theresa: I think for the swimming scene, or a lot of the sports scenes, we started out as clubs and then we kind of branch out into either a National Team or similar levels. So, I think the clubs played a very huge part in growing sport in Singapore.

Pin Xiu: And I think, we hope to see that more people from... What do you call that level?

Theresa: Developmental level? Or club level?

Pin Xiu: Yeah, from the public level, not so much agency or organisation level. Like, embracing people with disabilities when it comes to sports. Because I think that at the end of the day, I don't think adapting is that difficult. But I'm not sure. I said its not difficult because I've been inviting many people who have not experienced it or who are afraid to do it. Because you're afraid of what you don't know.

Theresa: Anyway, after we move from developmental squad towards increasingly advanced levels, we finally made it to the Paralympics. For me, I've been to four Paralympic Games, Athens, Beijing, London and then Rio.

Pin Xiu: 3 of them had me in it.

Theresa: The only one that didn't have you was Athens.

Pin Xiu: I started in Beijing, and then, I was supposed to go to Tokyo last year, but it has not happened yet. Hopefully it will happen this year. But really, when we were going to the major games, it was really at this level where we had to have Sports Science support. And like SSI, SDSC really came together to help us with these Sport Science support, because honestly, at a high-performance level without biomechanics, physiology and all these. It's really, really hard to improve further.

Theresa: I liken it to F1 cars. So, you know how there's all the different parts that you all focus on. Right? It's quite similar. I feel like it's for us. There's someone who focuses on diet, and one that focuses on strength conditioning, and one that focuses on our recent analysis. And the Coach is the overseeing leader of the team. And I think all of us, and all of us have our roles to play. And for us, it is to take in all this information that different people have and use it to swim as fast as you can.

Pin Xiu: We are the cars and they are the drivers.

Theresa: We are the cars, are we the drivers? Yes, we are the drivers

Pin Xiu: Are we the cars? Yes, we are the cars and the drivers. Our body is the car and our mind is the driver.

Theresa: And, it just shows that how much everybody's roles are so important and plays a part in allowing us to be as fast as we can.

Pin Xiu: And also, at the same time, it's not only about physical, but also like our mental health. Because we really travel a lot during the year, we are away from our family a lot. And it's just the team and us. So, we all have to get along. Sometimes you don't get along sometimes you're just so tired and angry with each other. But the next day, it's ok again.

Theresa: The team dynamic and all that also plays a part, right? So, like on the left was, I call it the Dream Team One. And then the right is the Dream Team Two.

Pin Xiu: And now there is a Dream Team Three.

Teresa: Which I am not involved in.

Pin Xiu: You will always be part of the team. You are the Technical Director, Suit Director. She helps me to put on my swimsuit.

Theresa: Yes, I think, once we get to that point of Paralympic level success. It's another level of maintaining it and keeping it there. Right? There's the fun part, like the celebrations, the bit of happy tears. But after that, what comes after? It is still having to go back and really work on what you need to work on with our team. And how do you continue to get better? Or how do you continue to contribute to the larger world?

Pin Xiu: So, we are really very fortunate to have this kind of support. Because if not for, I actually think we haven't talked about support from the very, very young age. Later, remind me to share about it. Again, I think if we don't have such support, it's also difficult to maintain and keep our cars in shape. All this maintenance. And you just need somebody constantly pushing you. Once you're done, your body is like, it's time to be able to give back to society, to help the people who also need this kind of support in future.

Theresa: It is the team that we are surrounded with. During trainings, competitions, but when you go home, it is a completely different team, right? It's our families or friends, sometimes it's also ourselves, how we deal with what we just experienced at the Games, or how we feel that day. It's not just a one team thing. It is a very holistic kind of dynamic that you have to balance.

Pin Xiu: When I was young, I didn't know that there was such a thing. If I didn't know that there were sports for people with disabilities, if I didn't know SDSC existed, I would not even have started this journey. Even before I was 12, I actually signed up for a competition when I was 11. Because just somebody just alerted it to me and I signed on, but somehow the piece of paper got lost in transition somewhere. And I didn't start sports until the volunteer approached me. So, it's important for awareness to be raised about such events, such opportunities. And, again, if the volunteer wasn't there, I will not be where we are today. Right? So, these kind of programmes, swimming programmes at public swimming pools or anything, just having more awareness for all this, and having more of such programmes is essential.

Theresa: I think, it's when we create programmes, these days, I think we had it really good already. It's continuing to get better. And I think right now is pretty good. The level of support that we get as Para-Athletes. compared to non-Para-Athletes, I think it's pretty good.

Pin Xiu: In terms of sport, Singapore level, I would say it's similar.

Theresa: But I think you also have to take it back to developmental level to learn to swim level, learn to play level. Are we doing enough to make sure that access is available to everybody? And when we say inclusive, do we really mean inclusive, you know, or do we just mean, inclusive when you want to be?

I think it's about, knowing that when you create things you have to think about everybody that you want to create for. It's not just how you see both of us and then you base it on us. Because it's more than just who you see. It's a whole different variety of disabilities and ability levels.

Pin Xiu: Correct. And also, once you get an opportunity, you have to really, really work hard and go through every part of the journey. You cannot just expect to succeed the next day or the next month. It's also going through that journey. And, I think I've learned a lot of things along this journey, and I wouldn't have changed it anyway, I wouldn't immediately win a gold medal at the Paralympics.

Theresa: I think it's like how you said. It's a two-way thing, right? You can create that programme but how do you also make sure that is received? So, like the athletes on the other side? They have to understand how, it's not just "We give you everything and then you get success".

Pin Xiu: You cannot expect everything on day one also.

Theresa: So, I think it's a whole holistic training two-way thing.

Pin Xiu: But along the way we learnt so much like: commitment, discipline, resilience, and everything. And it's really, so much life skills.

Teresa: I think, I definitely wouldn't be here without all the agencies or the organisations, all the support from family, friends and all over, that we have received. I think, while we have achieved pretty significant levels of success, I think we could definitely do a lot better.

Pin Xiu: We could do a lot better. No, no us, the system.

Theresa: The sporting culture. There's a lot more that can be grown, you know, and it's about understanding that you, you have abilities to access, for people who have disabilities, knowing that they can access it, and you as an organisation being able to provide that access.

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Pin Xiu: Jokes aside, you can learn a lot more from me. I learnt enough in the pool, but it's time for me to also take opportunity to try to give back to society whenever I can. And I think it's important too. So, whenever people meet me, some people said that I have a very good support system, which I completely agree. And I think I'm really, really fortunate to have that. Without all of these, as Theresa mentioned, just now, it's difficult. I hope that this kind of support system is available for other athletes out there as well and also other people with disabilities. Sometimes, it's also your job to go and find it. To go and find what you want and how they can help.

Theresa: I think that's all we have today. Thank you for listening to us. Thank you for being here, and we will take questions.