

She traded in a cushy job in Singapore for sleepless nights of gunfire in war-torn Timor Leste. United Nations volunteer **Bridgette See** tells YVONNE KWOK why she still wants to go back there.

# Biting the bullet

**I**t was like something from an Angelina Jolie movie. After a day of huddling indoors at the United Nations (UN) compound in Dili, hearing the cacophony of gunfire outside their front door, Bridgette See saw her first gunshot victim.

A stream of injured policemen were dragged or carried into the UN clinic. They had been hurt after being shot at by soldiers who mistook them for rebels.

With her basic first aid experience, the 31-year-old was asked to help clean the gaping black holes. When the first victim was carried in with four bullet wounds to his chest, she was so shocked that she cried. "After just five minutes helping out, my gloves were stained with blood. There was blood on the floor, blood on the beds. This was no way for anyone to die."

This was what the world needed to see. This was the reason why Bridgette, no heroine by her own admission, volunteered to go into a country that others were trying to leave.

The fledgling nation was plunged into violence in late April, after the controversial sacking of 600 soldiers born in the western districts. The civil war pitted Timorese from the east against their brothers from the west.

For the past year, Bridgette had been working with Unicef (United Nations' Children's Fund) and the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) as a media volunteer, earning only US\$500 a month. Her job was to write about the violence and suffering she saw and publicise the stories to the world media to get more awareness.

After the violence escalated in April, she stayed on, leaving only when all the Singaporeans there were being pulled out of the country for their own safety in late May.

Even now, while headlines still read "Timor Leste braces for massive protests" and the country is described as "restive", she wants to go back. It can only be an act of supreme bravery – or foolishness. But Bridgette says it's neither. "It's my responsibility," she states. "I owe it to the people to return and finish what I started."

## The girl who could be anything

This dedication to do-gooding has been a part of her since she was young. As a Temasek Junior College student, she was inspired by a teacher who had gone on a Raleigh Expedition →

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## herworld **interview**



She grew up in a village where she saw the children of her generation.



Her parents, you'll see, are in the SIF.

"My friends don't want to leave their jobs when they hit 30. They're already in their comfort zone. I don't ever want to be like that."

to Zimbabwe and went on mountain treks to interact with the local people.

Intrigued by the tale, Bridgette resolved to see as much of the world as possible in her lifetime, realising for the first time how big a world there was outside Singapore.

Looking at the woman she's grown up to be, you can sense that she's not the type to run away at the first sign of trouble. She looks you straight in the eye, answering your questions with the gravity of someone who has stood her ground many times before.

It was a demeanour that served her well during her time as a broadcast journalist at Channel News Asia. Two years ago, you would see her almost every night on TV, looking poised, well-groomed and articulate.

Then suddenly, the single girl gave up the glamorous life to pursue her two loves – travel and community work. It took everyone by surprise because her star was on the rise. During her four years as a journalist, she had won several awards at her station.

"So sayang (Malay for wasted)," said many of her friends when they heard she was quitting her glamorous job in 2004 to backpack through Asian countries like Cambodia and China.

The comments puzzled Bridgette, because she didn't feel she would be wasting her time. "I loved my job. I would wake up every morning excited to go to work, wondering what I would be doing that day," says the Nanyang Technological University communications graduate.

"But as the big 3-0 loomed, I began questioning myself – is this all I wanted from life? Looking at my friends and colleagues, I knew that many of them don't want to leave their jobs after they hit 30. They are already in the comfort zone, earning good salaries and with quite a bit to lose.

"I don't ever want to be like that. I want to keep trying new things, like writing and visiting out of the way places. I want to experience as many things as possible."

She handed in her resignation letter just before her 29th birthday, telling herself it was then or never. While other people might fret over a lack of a salary, the youngest

child of a civil servant dad and teacher mum never worried that she would end up starving on the streets.

"I have two hands and two feet. I can always work as a barista at a coffee joint if necessary. I've never gone for branded stuff, so I don't need much money to survive. I didn't doubt for a minute that I would survive," she says.

### Life beyond the 9-5

The first few months without a regular paycheck were tough, she recalls, even though she did freelance writing and even took up a job as an adventure guide.

"For the first time ever, I couldn't just buy any book I wanted or meet my friends for coffee at posh joints. I would meet them at the kopitiam instead," she recalls.

She admits that it was awkward at first because her friends always insisted on treating her to a meal or drinks, but she got over the feeling when she realised she was actually a source of amusement to them. "I was like a social could last without a proper job," she chuckled.

No one could have foreseen that her adventures would take her to Timor Leste though. Through her own Raleigh expedition to Chile after her graduation, Bridgette got to know people in the SIF. When a spot opened up in Timor Leste for a Singaporean volunteer last August, the Foundation asked if she would be interested. She said yes without hesitation. "I'd never been there before and was eager to put my skills as a media professional to use."

She knew that the country was still unstable, having emerged from a bloody war for independence from Indonesia not too long ago. But from friends in the SIF who had been there before, she heard that the streets of Dili were fairly safe "so I wasn't too worried".

Her mission was to write about the plight of the Timorese children, get her stories published on Unicef's website and publications and, through them, make the world aware of the situation in the country. She also

conducted workshops for local journalists on the sensitivities about stories relating to children.

"I was so horrified by some of the things they did that I would sometimes call or e-mail reporters whose stories I read to let them know how I feel. For instance, when they reported a rape case, they would name the girl right down to the district she came from, but they wouldn't say who the rapist was," she says with a shake of her head. "I felt I had to be a voice for the victims."

### Running towards danger

She was prepared for violence but, when the fighting started in April, it was still a shock for this sheltered Singaporean. "When I first heard the boom of artillery in the hills near Dili, I felt no fear at all. Ironically, they reminded me of joyous occasions, like National Day or New Year's eve, when we would be treated to spectacular fireworks displays," she says.

The civil unrest made her realise how lucky she was. "The Timorese were turning up at our doors with bags of rice, clothing, plastic pails and cooking stoves piled on their heads, shoulders and backs," she recalls. "Can we even begin to understand the fear in their hearts as they flee from their homes looking for safety?"

Her sense of purpose is the one reason that keeps her fighting to go back. "I feel as if I've abandoned my UN colleagues at a point when they needed me most. I've formed close bonds with them and many are still there. This is the point when they need help the most and you don't abandon your friends, do you?"

She doesn't want anyone to think that she is Mother Theresa by going back. "It would be more accurate to say that I've always meant to go back because I love the country. It's like Singapore back in the 60s," she says.

"There's a sense of excitement in the air because it's a newly independent country. Living there, you really feel like a pioneer. They are still making new laws, coming up with new school curriculums. There are opportunities to be had everywhere you turn."

But not everyone sees it that way. Strangers reading her blog <http://timorsunshine.blogspot.com> have called her foolhardy for wanting to go back. One commented patronisingly: "When you hear bullets, you run."

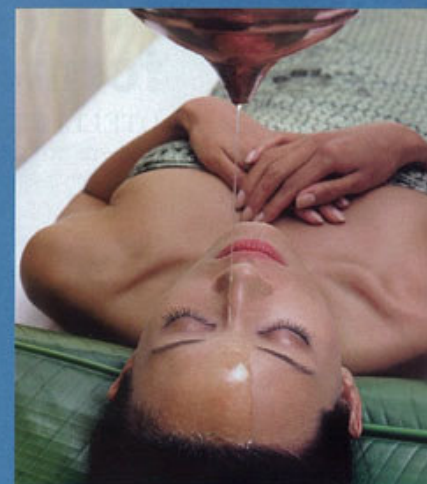
Her parents have had long talks with her to persuade her not to return. She calms their fears by talking with her colleagues back in Timor Leste to find out more about the situation there and then relaying the information back to her dad.

From the way she makes it sound, it's as if the past year has been a breeze, but she cautions that the life of a volunteer overseas is not for everyone. "Ask yourself – are you independent, resourceful? You need to solve problems on the spot, think fast on your feet and communicate with the local people who have no idea what you are talking about. It can get stressful."

But it has its rewards. "You don't have to be strapped to your desk your whole life. Go do the things you want to do, even if it means stepping out of your comfort zone. It's like being pinched. The experiences can be painful at times, but you feel so alive." **HW**

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