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“Singapura, oh Singapura,  
Sunny island set in the sea,  
Singapura, oh Singapura,  
Pretty flowers bloom for you and me...”

I never expected that these words from a verse of a song that I learnt at school during my childhood days would have such an impact in my choice of education and career. Several years ago, I was among the many 18-year olds who had just completed our GCE ‘A’ Level Examinations and faced with important life-changing decisions of what degree to pursue and at which university.

I had to ask myself – what do I enjoy doing, and what do I want to do for the rest of my life? At first, there were no clear answers, as I had many interests and several childhood ambitions! But one thing for sure was that I did not want to be another lawyer or engineer, like many of my friends. Then, one day, I received an offer to take up a Singapore Government (Overseas) Scholarship to study a discipline called “Horticulture”. That was when the words from the song “Singapura” came to my mind. The song had inspired me because it painted an image of Singapore as a beautiful tropical island, full of flowers and greenery, enjoyed by its people. I realized that I wanted to play a part in sustaining this “Garden City”. I wanted to do something that would contribute to Singapore as well as pursue my love of plants and the outdoors.

Ever since I was young, I had always loved gardening - tending to plants such as pandan, curry and tapioca grown in my grandparents’ *kampung* backyard, which later translated to numerous potted plants along the corridor of my HDB flat. My parents nurtured my love for the outdoors by taking me to places like Bukit Timah Nature Reserve for hiking, East Coast Park for cycling and picnicking, and the Botanic Gardens to feed the swans and for a roll in the lawn!

The Singapore Government (Overseas) Scholarship also offered me the chance to study in another country, something that my parents could not have afforded. Naturally, I was excited at the thought of engaging myself in the learning culture and lifestyle of people in a foreign land. Nonetheless, when I accepted the Scholarship to pursue a degree in Landscape Management at Massey University in New Zealand, I never expected that it would be an unforgettable and life-enriching experience! The first time I arrived in New Zealand in early February of the year 1994, I was overwhelmed by how different it was from Singapore. I was astounded by its endless fields of green grass grazed by countless sheep, as well as its picturesque landscape of mountains and rivers. It was like a dream come true!

The next four years that I spent in New Zealand were certainly the most wonderful time of my life. I quickly immersed myself in the culture of the locals, making friends with many New Zealanders, while forging links with Singaporeans and other foreign students. The numerous contacts that I made while studying at Massey University had proved useful to this day. The education system in New Zealand is one that allowed for greater interaction between lecturers and students, as well as many opportunities for self-learning and exploration. My mentors at Massey further fuelled my passion for various aspects of horticulture such as plant cultivation, the role of trees in the landscape and the use of plants and greenery for human enjoyment. I recalled many study trips to various private and public gardens, plant nurseries, nature reserves as well as towns and cities throughout New Zealand.

My overseas education had opened up my mind significantly, making me more matured and independent. This gave me a good foundation for my working life. Upon completion of my studies, I joined the National Parks Board in February 2000 as a project manager in the Parks Development Division. As part of my core job functions, I had opportunities to lead teams of professionals to plan and develop parks and park-related facilities in Singapore. Among my projects included developing a Skateboard Park in the heart of Orchard Road, implementing innovative public toilet design at Pasir Ris Park and overseeing slope stabilization works at Telok Blangah Hill Park.

Three years later, I was posted to the Physical Planning Branch, where my main responsibilities are to secure parks and green spaces, while formulating and reviewing guidelines on planning for parks and greenery in Singapore. Among the most challenging and interesting work that I was involved included preparing strategic plans for Singapore's islandwide Park Connector Network and the Heritage Roads scheme.

Next, I joined the Parks Programmes team in the Parks Division, where I collaborate with colleagues from NParks and other organisations to plan and organise various outreach events and activities that enhance the experience of park users.

I am currently in the Human Resource branch, where I am given the opportunity to deal with staff training and professional development. Putting together my background in the field of horticulture and my broad work exposure, I am truly excited at being primarily responsible for rolling out initiatives such as e-learning, On-Job-Training and 'Teach & Learn' that aim to build and deepen the learning and sharing culture among staff of National Parks Board.

Working in National Parks Board had enabled me to not only utilise my academic foundation, but also allowed me to continuously develop other skills and interests. For instance, I have been leading the Healthy Lifestyle Committee in National Parks Board, which plans and organises workplace health promotion activities for the benefit of all staff. This had stemmed from my desire to make a difference and provide an environment that is conducive for people to recharge, particularly in view of fast-paced lifestyles led by many Singaporeans. I enjoy working in National Parks Board, as I truly believe in the organisation's vision to transform Singapore from a "Garden City" to a "City in a Garden".

I realised that not many of my friends have been as lucky – to be able to pursue my passion while enjoying a challenging and enriching job that contributes to the well-being of Singaporeans. If you share a similar interest in plants and nature, and want to be a part of making Singapore a "City in a Garden", take the first step and accept the scholarship that leads to a rewarding career with the National Parks Board. Let's have more "blooms for you and me..."