



## Living their passion

Instead of clock-watching at a desk-bound job, some people find true career fulfilment by going the extra mile to live their dreams

# Spinning a yarn

Professional storyteller  
Sheila Wee weaves  
traditional stories that  
appeal to all age groups.

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to find out what  
drives Mrs Wee.



# Let me tell you a story...

By Janice Goh

Just as Alice in Wonderland chanced upon the rabbit hole to begin her adventures, Mrs Sheila Wee stumbled upon a workshop that would lead her to a career of storytelling exploits.

The workshop by American storyteller Cathy Spagnoli 13 years ago literally changed her life, said Mrs Wee.

The former pre-school teacher had trained and worked in early childhood education in Britain and Singapore and holds a teaching diploma in speech and drama from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

She recalled: "I had been telling stories since I was a child and used them in my early childhood teaching and speech and drama classes. But I had never imagined that anyone could earn their living by telling stories to adults as well as children."

In 1999, Mrs Wee, one of Singapore's pioneer professional storytellers, and a good friend founded Singapore's first storytelling circle, which revolves around a group of people who meet to hone their storytelling skills.

Then in 2001, the duo set up the first professional storytelling company here.

In 2006, Mrs Wee, a Singapore permanent resident married to a Singaporean, became a founding executive committee member of the Storytelling Association (Singapore), of which she is now the vice-president.

## One-woman show

The 53-year-old is also the founder of Storywise, a company that offers storytelling performances, consultancy services and



MAGIC OF WORDS: Mrs Wee enjoys teaching others to tell stories. PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG

training for adults, teens and children.

She collaborates with a team of freelance professional storytellers on specific projects, and her clients include the Ministry of Education, BBC Worldwide Channels, the Singapore Zoo, the National Library Board, as well as community organisations and schools.

In addition, this year, she is producing an anthology of stories, a storytelling manual and an instructional DVD for the Hong Kong Bureau of Education.

Mrs Wee, who earlier this month performed and conducted workshops at the Malaysia International Storytelling Festival and the Singapore International Storytelling Festival, said: "I have been lucky that through my travels, the Internet, and the annual Singapore International Storytelling Festival, I have made friends with and learned from some of the world's leading storytellers."

Her repertoire consists of mostly folktales with universal themes, which modern



audiences can still relate to. She works to develop new stories and techniques, a task that is sometimes sidelined amid her busy schedule.

In the past few months, for example, she has been working on stories for English as a foreign language, researched and retold the story of Mulan for a project with the Asian Civilisations Museum and developed teacher workshops on using storytelling with intellectually challenged children.

"I am now trying to set aside certain times of the year to work on developing my repertoire and to go for further training. I may have to turn work down to do this, but it is essential that I keep growing as a storyteller and a trainer," she said.

## Self-styled stories

There are several aspects of her job that she loves, and one of them is the variety involved in working with all ages and sectors of the society.

Another is watching the audience listen spellbound, as the hush falls over them when they become completely immersed in the story. Seeing participants learn and grow also warms her heart.

She said: "I really love teaching storytelling. No matter how long I do it, I still get a thrill when I see the participants realise that they can do it."

She clarifies that storytellers do not read books to children.

"We tell stories without a book," she emphasised, "to children, teenagers and adults. Storytellers do not just recite aloud other people's words. Even if we are retelling a well-known story, we create our own unique version and retell it in our own words."

She added: "Storytellers do not usually memorise the words of the stories they tell. We normally internalise the structure of the story, the characters, the setting, the plot and then retell it in the moment, in whatever words come out of our mouths."

And that is really no tall tale.

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