

A Place For Us
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A Place For Us

Cassandra Chiu



THIS BOOK is dedicated to the three women in my life—ahem, two women and one “WoDog”.

MOTHER, thank you for loving me unconditionally, for not discounting my abilities however little they may be at times and always encouraging me to reach for more. I truly appreciate all that you have done and selflessly sacrificed for me.

MY LITTLE PRINCESS, my daughter, for drawing out the determination in me to be the best mother I can be—without you, I would not be the woman I am today.

MY BELOVED GUIDE DOG, ESME. It was the experiences with you that made me the advocate I am today. It was your superior doggy intelligence which showed me that equal opportunities and true inclusivity is much more than mere tokenism alone. I love you for being the goofy character you are, for teaching me so many lessons in life, for faithfully supporting me through life’s ups and downs, and for trusting me to lead our partnership. There will never be another guide dog that could even come close to replacing you.

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Foreword

Professor Tommy Koh

I THANK Cassandra Chiu for asking me to contribute the Foreword to her heart-warming and inspiring book.

In the book, we learn of Cassandra's story and are introduced to one of her child psychiatrists, Dr. Octavio Gutierrez. He shared a memorable lesson with Cassandra—that she had no choice about losing her vision but she could make clever choices about her destiny and who she grew up to be. He told her that she could show the world that she was just as good as anyone else. Dr. Octavio urged her to find the will and not to give up.

Cassandra has lived up to Dr. Octavio's wise advice and exhortation. She is well-educated, works as a counsellor and psychotherapist, and is a successful single mother, bringing up her teenage daughter. She is a charismatic and eloquent speaker, and her outstanding qualities and achievements have been recognised, both at home and abroad. The prestigious World Economic Forum has appointed her as a Young Global Leader.

My friendship with Cassandra came about because I am the patron of the charity called Guide Dogs Association of the Blind (GDAB). The ambition of the association is to give our blind

compatriots new eyes in the form of guide dogs. Cassandra applied to GDAB for a guide dog. She was assessed to be suitable and sent to Melbourne for training and to be paired with Esme, a blond Labrador. For the past seven years, Esme has been her constant companion. Because of Esme, Cassandra has been able to live with independence, safety and mobility.

This book is autobiographical and about advocacy. Cassandra is a passionate young woman. What is she passionate about? She is hurt by some Singaporeans who have displayed prejudice, discrimination and cruelty towards people with disabilities. She is unhappy with the condescension with which people with disabilities are often treated. She is sad that most of our employers are not prepared to hire them for jobs for which they are qualified. She is disappointed that our society is still not as enlightened as other advanced countries in our treatment of people with disabilities. Through her advocacy and example, she wants to positively change Singapore. She wants Singapore to be a truly barrier-free society for those with disabilities, in terms of both physical barriers and non-physical barriers.

Some Singaporeans have been very kind to her and to others with disabilities. In her book, Cassandra has singled out ESM Goh Chok Tong and the CEO of Temasek Holdings, Ms. Ho Ching, for special praise. One of her heroes is the British politician, David Blunkett. Blind since birth and coming from a poor family in one of Sheffield's most deprived districts, he represented his constituency in the House of Commons for twenty-eight years. He served in former Prime Minister Tony Blair's cabinet, as Education and Employment Secretary, Home

Secretary and Work and Pensions Secretary. He is currently a member of the House of Lords and a Professor at the University of Sheffield.

Singapore does not yet have a role model like David Blunkett. We do, however, have our own heroes. We have a former Nominated Member of Parliament, Chia Yong Yong, who is wheelchair-bound but shone in the proceedings of the Singapore Parliament during her term. We have our national swimmer and Nominated Member of Parliament, Yip Pin Xiu, who has won gold medals for Singapore at both the 2012 London and 2016 Rio Paralympic games. We have Dr. Yeo Sze Ling, a gifted blind mathematician who works at A*Star and teaches at NTU. We have Dr. Wong Meng Ee, a blind man who teaches at NIE, and is a competitive swimmer. And we have my old friend, Tan Guan Heng, who is blind and has led a dignified and productive life as a book seller, journalist and writer.

In conclusion, I wish this book great success. I hope it will be read by many Singaporeans and friends abroad. I hope the book will be an inspiration to many in the disabled community in their struggle for acceptance and equality.

Tommy Koh
 Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 Patron, Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped
 Patron, Guide Dogs Association of the Blind
 January 2019

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An Introduction

A COUPLE OF years ago, some friends and I were chased out with a broom accompanied by Hainanese profanities from Yet Con, the famous chicken rice stall in Purvis Street. This was all because I was trying to go about my normal life, having a meal with friends on a Sunday afternoon with my trusted guide dog, Esme.

In comparison, my experience in Beijing's Wangfujing Street, the busiest commercial street in the city, was quite different. My friend, a local, was scolded and called crazy for asking if a guide dog was permitted into the teahouse we were trying to enter. The lady behind the counter actually asked if my friend was insulting her intelligence, and thought she was so stupid as to not know that guide dogs play a special role to guide their blind handlers and that they are allowed everywhere!

It is sad, but true, that in my thirty years of being blind, I had never experienced true inclusivity in the society I live in, yet it is something I advocate for almost every day of my life. The tides of oppression I face from education, to finding employment, simple banking, using public transport and going

to the supermarket or food court are like a tsunami. Being told overtly or covertly that I am strange or not welcomed is part of my everyday life.

Yet, I have a dream—that hopefully in my lifetime I would come to see persons with disabilities, or PWD, come to enjoy equal opportunities in all facets of our lives.

Towards the end of 2017, I tried applying for an educational module with the Lifelong Learning Institute to be a certified trainer for adult learners. Apart from running my counselling practice, I lecture post-graduate classes and give corporate training, so I felt that a recognised framework of training and accreditation for adult learners would be helpful in my professional development. I made an enquiry about what medium the course and assessments would be delivered in and if it was possible for me to access the teaching and assessment portal, as well as other options if my blindness were to prevent me from the usual route. The immediate answer I received was: “There is no compatibility for the JAWS software. All readings and assessments are on the Learning Management System (LMS). There are also webinars conducted for certain modules that the JAWS software will not work well in delivering its intent. Thank you.”

JAWS is quite literally my lifesaver, as it allows me to communicate through the computer with the rest of society. It is a text-to-speech computer software that allows a person with vision impairment to read and type through listening and speaking. Following their email response, I had a long telephone conversation with the institute, where, instead

of talking about how I could possibly access their teaching materials, I was questioned on how I would travel for classes, and why and where I would use the skills should I be allowed to take and complete the course.

I felt like a troublemaker for requesting to attend a course not designed for the blind.

Two months after my initial contact, they finally invited me for a face-to-face meeting to explore the possible ways I could take the course. While I eventually passed that so-called “interview” and was invited formally to apply for the course, I realise that had I not persisted, I would never have been given this opportunity as an equal. While there is no responsibility for any training provider or business to make their products or services accessible for persons with disabilities, most of the time, the tone is repressive instead of welcoming. It was a coincidence that just days after that meeting, a school where I am lecturing at offered me an opportunity to study a module in “curriculum design and assessment” at Swinburne University. This fitted nicely into my professional development plans and I gratefully jumped at the chance.

In comparison, in 2016, I worked with Myanmar Airways International to draft policies that would make their airlines accessible for all passengers with disabilities, as well as those with guide dogs. In a country that had barely opened her doors to international trade, let alone have any known guide dogs, her people were so willing to consider including the entire spectrum of persons with disabilities in their growth and development. When I visited their head office at Airport

Avenue Lane in Mingaladon, Yangon, a place where not many tourists would venture to, I not only got a chance to experience local food, culture and life first-hand, but also felt valued for my input. While we were all seated at the conference table, working through the policies I drafted, Mr. Peace, the Head of Quality, Safety, Security and Environment, intuitively started quietly announcing each point we were discussing for my benefit. Their spirit of inclusivity and corporate will are shining examples and serve as a great head start towards transforming their airlines into a truly inclusive one.

My experiences in other parts of the world such as that in Myanmar prompted a deeper reflection on the state of affairs for persons with disabilities in the Southeast Asian context and was the impetus for this book.

To tell you the story of what shaped my worldview and the fire within me, I must first tell you what came before. Like most children, I had dreams of growing up and someday being somebody. Being the prime minister, or an astronaut was not my idea of success; my earliest aspiration was simply to be a vet as I loved everything about animals, and I was smitten by that special relationship a pet has with its master. In many ways, I guess that has come full circle, as the relationship I have today with my guide dog is the pinnacle of that special relationship any person can ever have with an animal.

Whilst the doctors at Baylor College sealed my fate at age 8, with the second diagnosis of Stargardt's and with that, the confirmation of permanent and irreversible vision loss, in my view, Dr. Octavio Gutierrez who treated me was the one doctor

who impacted my life the most. Not an ophthalmologist or a professor in anything to do with the eyes, Dr. Octavio was a child psychiatrist. During my time in Houston, I was taken to him for several consultations to help me cope better with my new reality of being vision-impaired. His words that fateful day gave me the courage and the wisdom to realise in later years that I am ultimately responsible for making the most of my life. Neither "Stargardt's" nor "blindness" had that power; that is something not in my or anybody's ability to change, but what I do with my life is.

My dream is that as we enter the 2020s, we can come to recognise each and every person's right to thrive, that disability is neither strange nor distant, and to play our part that would allow every individual to have a place, here.

Part One

Looking Back

MY EARLIEST MEMORIES are those of my grandma sitting on the muted green fabric sofa, using one of those old-fashioned telephones, while I rode my little tricycle looking at her, wondering who she was talking to, and always hoping it was my daddy. On his days off, Dad would always take me downstairs to the carpark, pick me up and sit me atop the fuel tank of his shiny electric blue Kawasaki motorcycle, and off we would go on a joy ride.

Just as I turned 2, I started attending full-time preschool at Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) childcare on Outram Road. I hated it at first, just like any kid would, and would cry and plead in Teochew for Dad's red Mazda; by that time, Dad had sold the motorcycle and gotten a red Mazda so it would be easier for us to go out as a family. Although I have no memory of crying like a baby for months on end, Mom would tease me about it for many years to come. In time, I grew to love attending school, and made many new friends. The teachers became family friends and sometimes Mother would take me to their homes for visits on special occasions. I remember attending my favourite teacher Aunty

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Esme: Rebirth of Independence

THE 34TH PRESIDENT of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Neither a wise man nor a brave man lies down on the tracks of history to wait for the train of the future to run over him.” I was neither wise nor brave, but what I did do was to stand firmly at my crossroads, face the train of my future by taking ownership of my life and taking steps to gain the independent mobility and professional prospects I desired. However, when I got home to Singapore, I was so unprepared for what lay waiting on the tracks of my history for Esme and I.

I thought I was well-prepared, and well-trained with my month’s long stint at Guide Dogs Victoria, but “history” had another idea of what was required. For starters, it was December, so when Esme and I returned home, it rained buckets almost every day because of the Northeast Monsoon. Esme hated the rain, and she was like a totally different dog! Her bouncy character disappeared, and whilst she grudgingly continued her guiding under the rain, she refused to toilet at regular intervals, not even when my ex-husband took her instead of me! The longest she refused a toilet was from morning till night! I remembered my ex and I having this

conversation, and him encouraging me not to be so stressed out, as Esme would eventually settle down and toilet naturally. Everybody needs to go, when they need to go!

Just a day or two before Christmas, Esme and I were soaked to the bone, even my laptop in my backpack died after getting so wet. We were waiting at the taxi stand at Tanglin Shopping Centre, where my clinic was situated. We were waiting for a friend who worked nearby to pick us up as we were going to meet Professor Tommy Koh at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Traffic on the entire Orchard Road came to a standstill because of Christmas shoppers and the torrential downpour. We stood there for about two hours, for my friend to clear the horrendous traffic, which is highly unusual for Singapore.

The crazy December weather aside, I also faced an avalanche of people either asking me all about Esme or rejecting us altogether! Once, in another incident, during the early days of using a guide dog in Singapore, when the family and I were standing in line to buy some cakes at Bengawan Solo, a lady came up to me and indicating to Esme, asked in Mandarin, “What breed of dog is this?” I am not sure if I was just so tired of answering and facing rejections, or my understanding of the language is so poor, but I answered, “It’s a guide dog.” The lady retorted, “Surely your guide dog has a breed too?” I apologetically replied, “It’s a Labrador...” How embarrassing!

Although there were existing governmental legislations that support the use of guide dogs in public places,¹ in reality,

¹ The Rapid Transit Systems Regulations Chapter 263A allows for guide dogs on trains; the Environment Public Health Act Chapter 95 allows for guide dogs to be

things were quite different on the ground. Many service personnel and members of the public had never heard of, or seen a guide dog before, and understandably were not aware of the legislations or the difference between a guide dog or a pet. Prior to Esme, there were only three other guide dogs that ever spent a substantial time here. Stacy the guide dog that came to Singapore in the early 1980s had to be sent back to Australia after a short stint as society back then was not ready to accept guide dogs in public places. Nero who was guiding Alex, a staff member at the American embassy to Singapore in the early 2000s resorted to getting his wife to drive him and Nero around because as he puts it, the “attitude towards guide dogs was still stuck in the 5th century!” And Kendra, who was a gift to a Singaporean business man who is blind, travelled around the world with him and did not spend a lot of time in Singapore. So when Esme was brought into Singapore in 2011 as the first guide dog trained and designated to work in Singapore, society was not quite ready to frequently see and accept a guide dog amidst them in public places and on public transport. It was guaranteed that each time Esme and I ventured out, people screamed! Ran away! And demanded that the dog be taken away!

On entering premises

The first challenge I faced after getting home was gaining permission to enter Tanglin Shopping Centre where my new

brought into food establishments.

Some pages are omitted from this book preview

spatulas clinking and clanking, slicing, dicing, pushing and flipping the food, and spying with my limited sight if he would inadvertently fling some food onto his pristine white uniform. These are a bit of the many sights and sounds from childhood that I remember fondly.

I should not digress as breakfast time for Esme will roll around soon and at this rate, I will not have written anything by then. Without fail, no matter which time zone we are in, at 7am and 4pm precisely every day, Esme would insistently get my attention by pushing her wet nose on me, and “gallop” back and forth from the kitchen, or wherever her food is kept. She never stops until I stop whatever is keeping me busy and prepare her dinner, the only exception being when I am with a client in the office. A rather smart dog she is, if you ask me. And an undeniably loyal companion, to the very end.

Thank you, Esme, for joining me on this journey, and you too, dear reader, in reviewing my experiences that led to the accidental advocate that I grew into. I humbly invite you to join me on the next leg of this journey, and walk alongside us, to realise the dream of equal opportunities that awaits, truly—all of us.



Photo by Stefanus Elliot Lee

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