

Double Serve of Heart

For most people, McDonald's is synonymous with burgers, but REETA RAMAN discovers there is a big heart beating behind the fast-food giant.

Back in 1989, five-year-old Jane Lee was critically ill. She required a major heart surgery, but without financial assistance, Lee recalls, there was not much hope for her. Then, in stepped an unexpected knight in shining armour – fast-food giant, McDonald's.

While the ubiquitous golden arches have long been synonymous with the burgers and fries they serve, not many are as aware of the company's philanthropic side – a serving of good heart that goes back to 1984. In that year, McDonald's set up the Ronald McDonald House Charity, in memory of the company's founder, Ray Kroc and his belief in contributing back to the communities McDonald's operated in. To date, the charity has a network of local charities in 49 countries, and has awarded more than US\$440 million in grants and programme services globally towards helping children's causes.

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In Singapore, McDonald's set up the Ronald McDonald Children's Charity (RMCC) in 1989. Lee was its first beneficiary when she was given funding for her post operative treatments following her heart surgery at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. At the time, pediatric surgery was unavailable locally. “I had a new lease of life,” Lee says simply.

To date, Ms Linda Ming, secretary of the RMCC says the charity has helped more than 700 sick children from financially distressed families with grants



Ronald McDonald cheering up young patients at KK Women's and Children's Hospital on World Children's Day in 2002.

amounting to \$3.3 million. Most of the financial assistance rendered by the charity goes towards helping these families purchase medical consumables, nutritional supplements and handicap aids, and pay for their children's leukemia treatments and surgery.

The mainstay of the charity's funding comes from a commitment by McDonald's Singapore to pledge a five-cent donation for every Happy Meal sold. Other donations, explains Ming, are obtained from contributions collected through the RMCC donation boxes in all McDonald's restaurants, fundraising activities such as McDonald's annual World Children's Day and donations from the company's employees and business associates.

Ming attributes the generosity of their donors to the charity's cause which aims to help needy, sick children. For instance, in November 2003, through McDonald's World Children's Day, the RMCC raised \$80,000 for premature babies that required neonatal care and surgical treatment. The following year, through its World Children's Day, the charity went on to raise \$50,000 for Singaporean children infected with the HIV virus.

This year, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) partnered with the RMCC to open up the Ronald McDonald Family

Room in one of the hospital's closed wards in the Women's Wing. Worldwide, the family rooms are an extension of the Ronald McDonald House programme which aims to provide a nurturing and recuperative environment within the hospital for families of children undergoing treatment.

Says Associate Professor Ivy Ng, Chief Executive Officer at the KKH. “We understand that comfort will go a long way in

helping families cope in difficult times,” she says. The rooms have proven to be quite a hit among families, boasting an average occupancy rate of 60 per cent since the start of the year.

Having stayed in hospitals for most of her childhood, Lee knows better than most what a difference the right environment can make. Six years ago, Lee went overseas for an investigative procedure. “During my stay in the hospital there, I saw a nurse coaxing a pre-teen patient into taking her medicines. Her patience and innovation caught my attention and I thought, ‘I want to be just like her!’” Now, Lee is working towards becoming a nurse.

Not content with realising her ambition, Lee, like many others, continues to be inspired to help the RMCC's cause. Most recently, she was heavily involved in the charity's Shrek Ears fundraiser to help sick children. Lee's story is very much a testimony of how the charity has been able to inspire its beneficiaries to pay it forward and help others. From receiving hope to passing on hope, with the RMCC's help, Lee can now say that life has indeed come full circle for her.

Let's upsize that example. ☆