

Speech by Sharon Goh Puay Ngee – DIS 2010

To all my fellow friends from all over the world,

It is my pleasure to be standing here, to share with you all about my journey here in the Netherlands. My name is Sharon Goh, I come from a tiny sunny island near the equator called Singapore. I came to the Netherlands 3 years ago, to pursue my master's programme in Industrial Design at TU Delft, where I majored in Strategic Product Design, and graduated 8 months ago, under the HSP Huygens scholarship programme. Currently, I work at senz° umbrellas BV, implementing the business strategies for them in Asia.

As the saying goes, "Life is as high as the sky. You'll never know what you can design, unless you try." This has been my personal philosophy since I was young. And when I decided to pursue my studies in the Netherlands, this was a main reason that pushed me towards embracing a new life in the Netherlands. But leaving is never easy, I'm sure many of you can relate to this – leaving your friends and family behind can be unbearable. Back in 2008, I left my job as an assistant manager in design, where I was managing design events. When I restarted my life as a student again, I felt uncertain of what may be ahead of me at first.

Staying in Japan, Singapore and Australia before where I was used to meeting many Singaporeans, I was surprised to find that there were very few Singaporeans here (probably less than the fingers of my hands in my 3 years here). Because of this, this propelled me, to go out of my comfort zone and get to know other people more. Being here for 3 years now, I am very happy to be close to my friends from different countries, whom are now like my brothers and sisters. They are even closer to me than my friends in Singapore, because we went through so much together – living together in the same community, looking out for each other, having parties and playing games together. Because of them, my language and social skills are now better than when I was in Singapore, because the Netherlands has provided me a strong learning culture and a close international community of good friends.

Being convinced of what I was studying, I always believed in applying what I learnt into reality. So during my 2 years of studying here in TU Delft, 1 year of my study was interestingly spent on doing projects for companies like Philips Design, Asics Europe, Actiflow and senz° umbrellas, through tapping on our TU Delft's network with outside companies. These projects helped me to put my strategic product design studies into action – conducting real life consumer research for the Dutch, Korean and Taiwan markets, and creating design project solutions that work. Therefore, my advice to you is to explore working with different companies in the Netherlands, even while you are studying. Take part in different activities to get yourself engaged with the communities, to know the job market and social trends around you. Read more than just your text books; put your theories into reality.

Looking back, living in the Netherlands for the past three years has changed me a lot – especially in the following two aspects: directness and the willingness to take risks. Being an Asian girl, I was not used to the fact that Dutch people can be so direct in expressing what they feel at first. I used to think avoidance is a better way, to let problems rest. But working in a Dutch company, my colleagues make me realize how directness can lead to building one's character. In fact, we had a session some time ago, where all the bosses and employees sat together to pin point everyone's faults. It was scary to me at first. But from that session, it made me realize how it is natural we all have our own faults, and we should be aware of it to help ourselves and others become better. So, we should never be afraid to be pointed out our mistakes, but be thankful because these will improve us further.

The economic crisis last year took a big hit on many of us who were studying here in the Netherlands, and even now the economy is slowly recovering. It became more difficult to find a job than ever before. For many of us, we have only a one year search visa to find a job, so we need to be prudent with how

we can use our time wisely in finding jobs. Because many companies are cutting down manpower, it became difficult for people to find the ideal jobs they wanted.

How I managed to survive this period was doing internships and taking part in competitions – taking small steps to reach my goals. As I realized, unless you have a few years of previous experience, many companies find it difficult to hire new people during this period. Therefore, the best would be to start doing internships first, to gain the trust of your prospective employers, and see whether you are able to take the task. If you probably had the chance to work in a few companies during this period, my advice for you would be to choose to further your career at the place where you think you can maximize your potential in a company where you think can grow.

Even when you have not been successful in finding a project to work on, I would encourage you to join in different competitions like in design, business planning, technology, or the arts, because the Netherlands is a very favourable environment that encourages such nationwide competitions that highly support young talent. Therefore, use such opportunities to build yourself further while you can. I once won a sustainable business design competition in TU Delft and I was surprised how that provided me many chances to get to know different Dutch investors and media reporters. So it enabled me to be connected to the right people quickly.

It made me realize how the Dutch community is always very interested in investing in young talent towards starting new businesses and getting students connected to other companies. Therefore, never think that society has not given you the chance, but use the chance to make yourself be known. Now I have been working in senz° umbrellas BV for about one and a half years already, where I grew from being an intern doing market research to managing major Asian projects now in senz°, where I currently help the company in creating an online sales launch of senz° umbrellas all across different places in Asia Pacific – Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Australia, China and Hong Kong.

As the saying goes: “Consider it pure joy, my dear brothers and sisters, whenever you face trial of many kind, for you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its good work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Coming this far was never easy, especially when I am the only non-European person working within the company. It took a lot of effort to understand how Dutch companies work, to get into their culture, making others realize who you are and what you can be. I admit that my Dutch is still not as good as my other Dutch colleagues, but they never fail to encourage me. Along the way, I have learnt to understand them better. So as we accommodate each other’s strengths and weakness, we have gone a long way and helped improve one another at work. So my challenge to you all is to always try, never feel afraid to fail, and always believe that you can do it. Because if you never try, you will never know how high you can reach up to the skies.

The process is never easy, but you will enjoy your journey if you believe in it. So while you are studying here, I would encourage you all to embrace new cultures, learn Dutch while you are in school. Take the school holidays to get connected to the world, such as internships. Make friends who can be your potential brothers and sisters that are here for you.

That would be why some of the programmes here today would be good for you to get connected: like learning to speak Dutch, being an entrepreneur, finding a job in the Netherlands, and networking with all the international students and the Nuffic Neso representatives from around the world that you see here. Don’t be shy, get yourself involved in as much activities as you can, and make as many friends from the different countries you see today.

So thank you for listening, and thank you Nuffic for giving me this opportunity to talk to everyone. I wish you all success in your future endeavours here in the Netherlands. Veel succes en dank u wel!