



Lee: It seemed to me that I had a greater calling, and that's why I stepped up to help

PICTURES: ASHLEY LEE

From property to nursing, Lee gives life her best shot

BY CHARLENE CHIN

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Valentine's Day on Friday, Feb 14, was not a romantic one for Ashley Lee. Instead of celebrating the occasion with her husband and three children, Lee had spent a full day at a Basic Cardiac Life Support (BCLS) course, refining her skills to resuscitate adult and infant victims. The certificate, she said, and a registration with the Singapore Nursing Board, were the two minimum requirements she needed to rejoin the frontline workforce.

A former nurse turned real estate agent, Lee is currently a senior marketing director at ERA, where she brokers real estate sales, markets resale properties and new launches, and handles rentals. The bulk of her clientele come from referrals, and — much like her role in the emergency department — she considers herself a generalist, attending to all of her clients' property needs.

"Since the first Covid-19 case was announced in Singapore, I felt very uneasy," recalls Lee. This was back in Jan 23, when a 66-year-old Chinese national who flew into Singapore from Wuhan tested positive for the virus. "Being a registered nurse myself, I do not think that I should be hiding comfortably and doing nothing about this."

Lee then acted fast. Within the two weeks from the first case, she had consulted her husband on her decision to return to the frontline after seven years, and reached out to her old boss informing him of her intent. "My husband, being a healthcare worker himself, was pretty supportive. The only thing he told me was 'do take care of yourself'", she recalls.

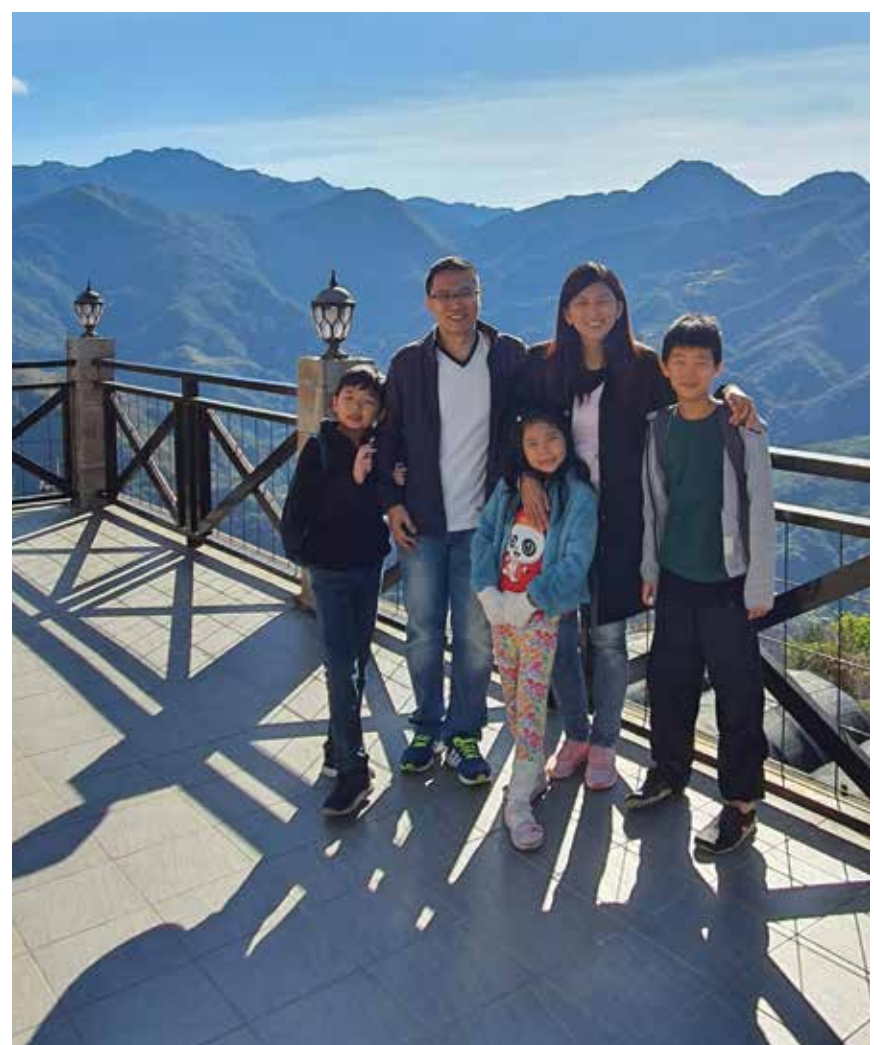
"Due to Covid-19, it seemed to me that I had a greater calling, and that's why I stepped up to help," says Lee. "It's not about whether we are worried about getting Covid-19," she adds. "Of course, healthcare workers do actually pose a higher risk, but that is what our duty requires of us."

Since then, Singapore has since seen a surge in cases, reaching a total of 28,794 as at May 19. The major hike in infections was due to new clusters emerging among foreign workers, who typically live in cramped dormitories, often unsanitary.

Until the beginning of April, the country had recorded daily cases that peaked at 73. But by the end of the month, Singapore registered 16,169 cases, a stark jump from the 926 cases in March, with a record daily jump of 1,426 cases on April 20. Out of the 323,000 workers who live in dorms, data as at May 18 from the Ministry of Health showed that 26,090 of these have tested positive for Covid-19. The government has since announced on May 12 that it will test all the workers residing in dorms.

In what has been coined a "circuit breaker", schools and non-essential businesses in Singapore have been suspended from running physical activities till June 1. Completions for BCLS courses have also been delayed till after the period. If Lee had hesitated on her decision, she "might have to join [the hospital] as an agency nurse instead", whose role would "face more restrictions".

By early March, Lee was back to old, familiar grounds. She now spends three days a week in the emergency department of one of the restructured hospitals, attending to patients' acute needs. "[When] they come in, the first people they need in the hospital is us, so we will attend to them, learn their diagnosis, and then send them into the



Ashley and her husband, who is also a healthcare worker, and children, aged 8, 10 and 12

respective places they belong to,” says Lee, although she prefers not to name the hospital.

PPE nightmare

For some of Lee’s roles, she has to don a full PPE, or personal protective equipment, depending on the potential of exposure to infections. These wearables include gloves, gowns, facemasks, respirators, goggles and face shields. Wearing full protective gear is also required “when we are in areas where we actually nurse patients who are having cough — those with respiratory symptoms — as we do not know if they are Covid-19 positive,” she says. Some assignments, she shares, require that they wear full PPE for the entire day. That could start from 8am and end at 4pm.

The end of the day would see her shirt soaked with sweat, and often wearing a N95 mask for the full day causes hypoxia, she shares. “You’ll feel like your head is tight, and very giddy. But after lots of water and some rest, it’ll be okay.”

The full procedure of donning and taking off a full body PPE is a cumbersome affair, and healthcare workers have to be outfitted with PPE in specially demarcated zones. In a guideline released on April 22, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted six steps just to don a full PPE, which starts off with washing hands with water and soap for 40 to 60 seconds, putting up the gowning, then attending to the face with masks, face shields and goggles. Gloves also have to be ensured that they are placed over the cuff of the gown.

The complex procedure makes Lee think twice about taking off the gown, no matter how short the period. “Because once you do it, you have to throw away everything — the shower cap, gloves, and gown — and then use alcohol wipes to clean your goggles,” she says, aware that healthcare services in many other countries face acute shortages of similar PPE. On days she has to wear the full gear, Lee paces out her water break just to save on supplies.

In March, the WHO called on industry and governments to ramp up manufacturing by 40% to meet rising global demand. It also shipped nearly half a million sets of PPE to 47 countries, noting however that already, “supplies are rapidly depleting”.



Lee is thankful for the support granted to her by her superiors in ERA, including Stanley Wong, associate division director (left) and Alex Yap, group division director

Thanks to better planning, Singapore’s healthcare workers have had sufficient protective gear while they tend to patients. The city-state also produced its first batch of surgical masks locally in mid-February, after plans to manufacture the items with the nation’s overseas partners fell through, revealed Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing in a Facebook post on May 6.

Juggling duties

Seven years ago, Lee made the decision to leave the healthcare industry to tend to her three children, then one, three, and five years’ old, despite still having passion for the role. The shift work, she says, made it tough to care for them. “I was thinking, for the sake of my children, I would just give up my career path

in nursing, and I would just leave for good.”

Her initial plan for the year had been to spend more time helping her son out with his Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) where the grades will determine which secondary school the child can gain admission. Considered a “high stakes” exam, it is not uncommon to hear of parents quitting their jobs or taking time off to coach their children.

At present, as both Lee and her husband are frontline workers, and with no caregiver to send their children to and from school, Lee has had her kids— now eight, 10 and 12 — attend classes virtually. She is “very, very thankful” for the support from teachers as “some of them actually help me call home and speak to the kids, to guide them to enter their respective Google Meets classes.”

After Lee’s shift ends at the hospital, she spends her time with her family and serving her real estate clients.

When asked how long she would juggle her duties as a nurse and mother before returning to property full-time, Lee shares that she does not have a set timeline for it. “I do not think that it will be that soon, because I do not know when Covid-19 will end. If it’s possible, I will actually try to help out until it ends, if time permits.”

So far, Lee’s move back to help the healthcare industry during the pandemic has been met with support. Although she says she is “rusty with some of the workflows and needs to consult her colleagues”, they are glad that Lee is back on their team. “Some of them mentioned that it’s good to have a familiar face, some form of moral support during this time.”

Lee also highlighted the support given by her superiors in ERA, who have agreed to cover her duties if she cannot be present. “Some showflats may not welcome me, because I have to declare that I’m a healthcare worker. And some sellers, they actually want us to make a health declaration before house visits and viewings,” she explains. The support granted to her from her colleagues “is very helpful, because — like nursing — sometimes we cannot do it alone, and someone has to step in to help. Teamwork is very important,” she notes.

Staying positive

In the worst-case scenario where Lee or her husband were to contract the virus and “have to be warded or isolated from our family”, she admits that “it would make me very heartbroken, having to be away from them”.

Regardless of her fears, Lee chooses to look at the glass half full, always giving life her best shot. “I think the greatest learning point from this pandemic is that we cannot take things for granted and assume our lives would continue to go on as usual,” she says.

“Things may not always go right for us, especially in times of uncertainty. Right now, I think it’s important for us to be more sensitive to the needs of others and to show more care and concern. Just by putting the needs of others above ourselves, with simple gestures like wearing a mask when we go out, or doing our due diligence by staying at home,” Lee says. “Never think that the small things that you do for others doesn’t matter, because every little effort counts.” ■

HOW TO GUIDE - PUTTING ON PPE FOR CONTACT/DROPLET PRECAUTIONS

1 Perform hand hygiene

Alcohol based handrub
Rub hands for 20–30 seconds.
or
Water and soap
Wash hands for 40–60 seconds.



2 Put on the gown



3 Put on the mask

Medical mask.



4 Put on eye protection

Put on face shield or goggles.



5 Put on gloves

Ensure glove is placed over the cuff of the gown.



Full PPE



HOW TO GUIDE - TAKING OFF PPE FOR CONTACT/DROPLET PRECAUTIONS

Ensure that infection waste containers are available for safe disposal of PPE. Separate containers should be available for reusable items.
Order is important

1 Remove gloves



2 Remove the gown

Ensure gown is pulled away from the body during removal, and that clothing does not become contaminated and dispose of them safely.



3 Perform hand hygiene

Alcohol based handrub
Rub hands for 20–30 seconds.
or
Water and soap
Wash hands for 40–60 seconds.



4 Remove eye protection

Remove face shield or goggles.



5 Remove the mask

Ensure you are taking the mask off from the straps, avoid touching the mask.



6 Perform hand hygiene

Alcohol based handrub
Rub hands for 20–30 seconds.
or
Water and soap
Wash hands for 40–60 seconds.



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