Home, truly: The place that nurtured me for abroad

In 2013, Rachel won two titles in Miss World Singapore - second runner-up and 'Miss Beauty with a Purpose'. She is currently working in a private equity fund in Tokyo, Japan.

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Published
Jan 4, 2018, 6:16 pm SGT
Overseas Singaporeans carry fond memories of their time in the Republic. The Straits Times spoke to some of the youngsters based abroad on how their stay here prepared them for the stint abroad, for this special report.

Kirstin Yip
Home really has been the whole world for siblings, Rachel and Brendan Leng.

Now 27 and 23, they left Singapore when they were barely six and two years old.

After their father got a position in Shanghai, they spent over a decade growing up in China’s biggest city.

At 19, Rachel followed her heart to Duke University in the United States. She took a double degree in Public Policy and East Asian and Middle Eastern studies, with a minor in Economics.

Brendan, in the meantime, had moved back to Singapore with his parents to finish his International Baccalaureate and serve his National Service. He is now studying Medicine in the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

After graduating from Duke, Rachel returned to Singapore where she took part in Miss Singapore World 2013. Despite having no prior pageant experience, she managed to snag ‘Second Runner-up’ and ‘Miss Beauty with a Purpose’.
The 23-year-old then headed back to the United States to complete her Masters’ degree in East Asian Studies at Harvard University. She worked for a year in South Korea and is now working at a private equity fund in Japan.

Though they spent many years abroad, the duo have always held Singapore close to their hearts.

“Even though we lived abroad, our parents really taught us it was important to stay rooted to being Singaporean,” Rachel explains.

The family always made it a point to return home for Chinese New Year, summer break and Christmas.

Brendan adds, “They didn’t want us to lose the Singaporean culture as well as our sense of belonging here.”
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The Leng family enjoying a drink while visiting Brendan in the United Kingdom. PHOTO: RACHEL LENG

Like many other Singaporeans living abroad alone, they miss their family the most.

“It’s always the first six months or so (in a new country) that is the most difficult,” Rachel says. “There isn’t always someone to come back to. Your parents aren’t waiting for you when you come back from work or after school.”

Despite all the challenges that come with living overseas, both Rachel and Brendan have never let it stop them from exploring the globe.

When asked what drives her to keep moving to different countries, Rachel tells me: “A lot of it is curiosity. I love learning about different peoples, cultures and ways of life.”

She believes that Singapore’s multinational and multi-cultural society also prepared her for life overseas.

She says: “Having that base and then going abroad really brings you a different kind of mindset, perspective and insight.”

For Brendan, it was the army that prepared him. He cites the discipline instilled in him that made him organised, punctual and on the ball while at university.

Now in the third year of his studies, Brendan spends a lot of time talking to his patients, who sometimes still give him a culture shock.

“Some will refer to their hearts as tickers and when I first heard that term I was like, ‘what are they talking about?’ That was eye-opening for me. I had to find ways to approach it to not look completely unaware of their culture.”

Living abroad has also taught many valuable lessons. Rachel tells me: “As a young woman, I’ve learned a lot about believing in yourself more and being
more confident. Starting a new job is one of the most stressful things in life. Moving to a new country where you don’t know anyone is also incredibly stressful.

“Having to do that multiple times and to know that you can do it really gives you a lot of confidence when trying out new things.”

She enjoys being able to try many things, like being in Miss Singapore World or working in finance despite having no prior background in either. She encourages everyone to try living abroad to experience what it is like.

“You never know how much you can actually achieve. And if you don’t achieve, it doesn’t matter. Everyone fails. But if you do achieve, you surprise even yourself.”

Brendan says his biggest takeaway from life abroad is the “adaptability to integrate into a new environment and the ability to establish good relationships regardless of differences in cultures.”
Rachel and Brendan during their family trip, when Rachel and her parents visited Brendan in the United Kingdom. PHOTO: RACHEL LENG

When asked about advice for Singaporeans considering life overseas, Rachel suggests: “Keep an open mind. Try and connect with the local community and customs and that will open up a lot of opportunities for you to meet people. You will learn a lot about yourself and others.”

Rachel says that although she is keeping her options open, she would like to return permanently to Singapore in the future.

She has considered getting into politics or working in the government.

“Ultimately, I still identify as Singaporean and Singapore still has a very warm place in my heart, as a place that I’ll always call home.

"I hope to be able to take all my experiences abroad and turn them into something positive for the Singapore society.”

Brendan also sees himself returning to Singapore to continue practicing medicine.

“I still feel most comfortable, most at home in Singapore.”