

Heeding The Call

Heartfelt in her motivation to help the needy, Christine Laimer's businesslike approach to charity fills stomachs and sees results – fast

Originally from Vienna, Austria, Christine and Henry Laimer now live in Singapore with their five-year-old daughter. Having lived in Kuala Lumpur for nearly three years before arriving in Singapore on a business trip, they stayed for six years. Says Christine Laimer, "Singapore is such a beautiful country, why would we leave?"

In November 2002 a press article prompted what Laimer now describes as "the call of her life." The report claimed every bakery in Singapore threw away leftovers at the end of each day. "And there was this huge outcry from Singaporeans – what a waste," she says. Having discussed ideas with her husband and advertised in the newspaper for volunteers, their first weekend saw them receiving 150 phone calls from "enthusiastic Singaporeans" all pledging support. Swinging into action, Laimer contacted lawyers to draft letters of indemnity and drew up a plan to contact bakeries. "At a certain point in life you have to take up a challenge and if you don't pick that up you regret it," she states. "I was sure needy people would be happy about the bread. And I was positive I could put together a feasible programme and get enough volunteers involved. If I hadn't acted then it would have been a sin – it was really one of those moments."

Thus the charity Food From The Heart (FFTH) was born, its core business being the bread programme. "We rescue 20,000 kg of bread from the garbage bin every month," claims Laimer. "The retail value of the bread we distribute is between S\$120,000 to 150,000." Some 1,700 volunteers facilitate 400 collections per week and it is run like a business with the Laimers working closely together. "I am more involved with daily operations, but my husband chips in with his business experience," she says.

Originally studying interior design, Laimer

found herself organising fairs, events and press conferences and became a specialist in marketing and branding. In Singapore the couple's company Omega builds huge automatic warehouses – multimillion-dollar projects consisting of many components "but if one small thing is not taken care of then the whole thing doesn't work, so I always think ahead, have contingency plans and look at the overall picture," she says.

This stood Laimer in good stead for what came next. They registered the volunteers and explained what they planned to do. "Then we assigned routes and jobs for the volunteers and, in February 2003, we started rolling," she explains. They quickly ramped up the

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operation partly due to the fact that Fujitsu Asia gave them a tailor-made software tracking system which allowed them to track the bread: They know exactly how many buns and loaves are being collected and delivered. The whole operation was set up within three months. "We work like maniacs and we have a lot of enthusiastic volunteers helping," says Laimer. "Without all the volunteers all this would not have been possible."

The first company to come on board was Prima Food, then Four Leaves. Laimer explains: "I was still nervous at that time because I knew it was critical to get them on board – then came Delifrance and I knew it was going to be a breeze. After getting the big boys, we phased in all the others and approached other bakeries, restaurants and sandwich shops." Two years ago a major breakthrough occurred with hotels coming on board. The Grand Hyatt was the first, then

others followed: The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia, The Shangri-La, The Fullerton, The Regent and Four Seasons.

A major spin-off community programme is the Food Goodie Bag programme, an adoption scheme of sorts. "We appeal to corporations and ask, 'Please give us the funds to purchase food for 50 families for one year. The cost of the food goodie bag is \$50 per month and, if you calculate that, it takes \$30,000 per year to feed 50 families for one whole year.' So we appeal to corporations to provide the funds and then we pledge to deliver the food goodie bags to schools and the teachers hand them to the parents."

But was Laimer looking for a full-time job with an eight-month-old baby daughter to look after? "Many people asked me why I did it at that time." She jokingly calls FFTH her second baby. "Every day there were faxes, phone calls and somebody giving us transport or donating money," she says. But combining the two wasn't difficult because, she explains, it was an exciting and celebratory phase rather than a burden. Every year in May the Laimers also organise the Passion Ball. "It takes five months of preparation but it brings in the big bucks," she says.

Of her family life, Laimer says, "I bring my daughter out every Sunday to the zoo and involve her in outdoor activities." She goes rock climbing and cycling with her daughter and manages to run six times a week with a jogging buddy.

Although they visit Austria every year, the family has no plans to return there to live. "Our daughter is growing up speaking English, German and Mandarin and her friends are locals," Laimer explains. But skiing is the one thing she misses.

Her future dream? "That in 20 years time my daughter would come to visit Singapore and say 'my parents started FFTH 20 years ago.'" □

Christine Laimer