

“ Though clichéd, it cannot be emphasised enough that disability does not determine how far one can go. Given the right conditions and opportunities, anybody can thrive. These Biomedical Engineering students from PolyU are developing a navigation device to help the visually impaired run independently in sports grounds. ”

changing, after all. Sometimes, they might have to give in to reality and lower their standards to accomplish what they originally wanted to do. “We have to adapt to changes in the environment. We cannot go on blindly at full speed all the time. We should adjust according to our abilities, the environment, and what we encounter,” said Oscar.

“ Even though the impact might be limited at times, there is at least some exposure, which spreads the idea. After all, we have to build our own experience,”

Edmond added. There is no way to achieve instant success. Yoyo also stated that there are bound to be things they cannot do.

It is a hard row to hoe. Are they perseverant, or simply foolish? Oscar pointed out that the first step to success is to act. They must seize their own opportunities. Edmond, similarly, thought that it is okay to be ambitious; when facing difficulties, they must keep their vision in mind and keep moving forward. With each experience, they will learn something new, and their passion will be as strong as ever.

09

“FESTYLE”
NURTURED FROM IDEALISM:

THE LITTLE
HOTHOUSE
FLOWER AND
WOMEN’S PATH TO
EMPOWERMENT

FESTYLE -
YIP HIU WAI DING DING



Pumpkin and garlic meatloaf, lotus root stuffed with fish, braised chicken wings with mushrooms... As you browse the “Festyle” website, you will find a wide variety of home-cooked dishes that will make you feel like you are home for dinner. Clicking on the logo in the top right corner lets you order a “ready-to-cook cuisine package” of these dishes, which will then be delivered to your home. This is the main service of

Festyle. It is worth noting that a group of women, some of whom new immigrants or women from grassroots backgrounds, produce these meal packages, from writing the recipes to handling the ingredients.

LEGACY OF PARENTS

Ding Ding started Festyle with her team for various reasons.

“I studied sociology in university. Sociology focuses on social issues, that is, how social structures cause problems, especially in capitalist societies. The more I studied, the more powerless I felt; with the political situation in Hong Kong, I wondered if it was possible for me to do something to solve social problems.”

After much research, she stumbled upon the concept of social enterprises and became convinced that they can solve social problems effectively. “I heard that if you put \$1 in Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), you can generate only \$1 in socio-economic return; but if you put \$1 in a social enterprise, you can generate \$13 in socio-economic return.”

On top of that, it turned out that Ding Ding had always wanted to start her own business. “I want to inherit my father and mother’s legacy. My father is a restaurant owner, but he didn’t open his restaurant in Hong Kong or in Mainland China — he opened it in a city in West Africa. He found a completely new path. I think that’s the true entrepreneurial spirit.” Ding Ding talked of her father like a legend, with utmost admiration. “He has high standards for food. Every time he came back to Hong Kong, he would prepare delicious food even in the small kitchen at home.” When Ding Ding was still in kindergarten, her father was already running a Chinese restaurant in West Africa and mostly away from home, so her mother took care of the family singlehandedly.



“My mother’s style was healthy, homely, cheap, and frugal — that’s how she raised me and my siblings. My parents’ two sets of thinking are what I hope to pass on.”

So, Ding Ding took her first step into entrepreneurship by participating in the Hong Kong Social Enterprise Challenge with four of her classmates and friends. Ding Ding’s idea of Festyle is closely related to her mother. Ding Ding has one brother and one sister, and her mother gave up her job to take care of them, letting go of her personal interests to take up the burden of her family, just like many women do. That was why Ding Ding wanted to build a social enterprise to empower women by giving them an opportunity to work outside of home and participate in the community, and thus, Festyle was born.

Ding Ding’s team won the second place even though it was their first competition; after that, Ding Ding entered as many entrepreneurial competitions as she could, winning many grants and prizes, and accumulating several hundred thousand dollars in capital. “But for a business, a few hundred thousand dollars is not much, and it can run out in six to nine months. Not to mention that in the catering business, renovation alone can cost that kind of money, so it was definitely not enough.” But Ding Ding still wanted to give it a go, so she went into Festyle full-time immediately after graduation. “It may seem like you’re sacrificing something, but when you think about it, you don’t have anything to sacrifice. But starting a business was not as easy as I expected either.” Winning the prizes was just the first step, and the real hurdles were still to come.

WAITING FOR LIGHT IN DARK TIMES

Shortly after Ding Ding went full-time with Festyle, one of her business partners passed away unexpectedly. “My relatives were all still alive, even my great-grandmother. It was the first time in my life facing the death of someone so close.” This had a huge impact not only on Ding Ding, but also the morale and operations of the team. However, things still had to be done. “While we were sad, we helped with his funeral and rebuilt the company structure,” Ding Ding’s voice trembled as she recalled the event.

“Although it was no longer the original team, if we wanted to keep the company running, we had to keep working hard. This was also to continue his mission. He was gone, so we kept working in his honour.”

Ding Ding described the year that followed as a “dark period” with problems in every aspect. “I thought hiring women would be easy, but it wasn’t; I thought finding a working kitchen would be easy, but it wasn’t either.” She found that women from grassroots backgrounds often had to work long hours to support their families, making it difficult for them to take up

part-time jobs. On the other hand, empty nest women with no financial pressure would not want to spend long hours in the kitchen preparing ingredients. “These are common challenges in the catering industry. You just have to keep looking.” Over the years, Ding Ding has finally found more than 10 women to help write the recipes and hired three to four women to run the daily operations.

For the women to make meal packages, there must be a kitchen for them to work in. Initially, Ding Ding wanted to rent a kitchen from a restaurant, but she failed repeatedly: “One restaurant talked to us for a long time, but suddenly it didn’t work out. Then, a second restaurant let us in, but suddenly it had to stop because the lease was up and the restaurant wasn’t going to renew it, so we had to move out.” It might sound like nothing, but in fact, it is a lot of work to pull out of a kitchen, as frustrating as “breaking up with a lover”, as Ding Ding described it. After endless waiting and searching, Ding Ding finally came across an opportunity and found the current location in Kwai Chung. Finding a location that she could use without worrying was a major turning point for Festyle.

“ To start a business is to see a faint light in the darkness and follow it. This is especially true for social enterprises,” Ding Ding said. Outsiders may think that this sophisticated remark does not sound like something Ding Ding would say, as she looks as young as a bright girl who has just entered university. Indeed, Ding Ding used to be a little hothouse flower, bathed in idealism in an ivory tower; through the years, she has gone from idealism to “Festyle”, from a little hothouse flower to grass standing strong in the wind, as strong as her mother and many women who carry heavy burdens. ”

Now, Festyle is getting on track, and only needs more customers and orders. Ding Ding laughed that these women have become like mothers to her. “Once, I had a cold and was ill for three weeks. They brought me secret home remedies, including cold medicine and home-made stewed lemon with dried orange peel. They bring me whatever they have made at home so that we can try it together. I’ve tried their walnut cookies — the cookies were so much more delicious than the ones sold in shops.”

After getting to know one other, Ding Ding marvelled at the women’s ability:

“**Actually, it’s not me who is empowering them — it’s them who are empowering me.**”

