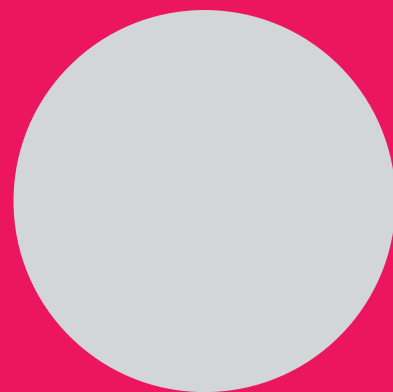


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TEARING OFF LABELS BY TELLING STORIES

UNSPOKEN –
SIN HIU LAAM OPHELLIA

REJECT STEREOTYPES, EVERYONE IS BEAUTIFUL

On UNSPOKEN's Facebook page, there is a quote: "It takes a long time to produce a gorgeous pearl. Even a small pearl must undergo a long polishing process to shine. The same can be said for any kind of beauty." To Ophellia, everyone has a story to tell, and every story is worth listening to.

When Ophellia first started working as a social worker and narrative therapist in prison many years ago, she was scared; but after spending some time with the prisoners, she realised that they were no different from the rest of us, and most of them value bonds and relationships highly. "I remember a group member called "Cheese". He was very quiet in the group and seldom spoke up. But later, he began to write to me, sharing with me his inner world in words — he even drew me a beautiful thank-you card. I didn't expect a 'tough guy' to do such things, so I was really surprised." She wanted to bring this "surprise" to everyone. "I knew that no one would have the patience and interest to listen to other people's stories, so I wanted to use a softer and more interesting

approach to expose people to the stories of rehabilitated people." Therefore, Ophellia brought together a team of designers and media workers to collect stories from rehabilitated people through conversations, turning them into designs and text to be printed on T-shirts for sale. Each T-shirt has a QR code printed on it, and one can simply scan the QR code to read the story of the rehabilitated person. The biggest challenge in the process was getting involved in the fashion field. The team spent a lot of time choosing fabrics and cuts, comparing different colours and prices. Finally, they found a thick 100% cotton fabric from a local manufacturer. Although the price was high, the quality was guaranteed and it was immune to colour bleeding and pilling.



One might think that everything is ready, but there are always discrepancies between reality and imagination. What was considered a beautiful design became a business challenge after the product was launched. What kinds of design appeal to Hongkongers? What is the target market? It turned out that being a social enterprise in Hong Kong is also a label.

“It’s hard to run a social enterprise in Hong Kong because people think that social enterprises provide free products, or that the products should be cheaper.”

Ophellia also thinks that most people in Hong Kong prefer big brands instead of local brands, unlike Japan and Taiwan. “Hong Kong people are willing to donate money and spend money, but they are not used to buying from social enterprises yet.” It is also difficult for social enterprises

to build a reputation in a short period of time. “I’m sure more people will hear about us through media promotions, but there’s a lot to take care of in a short time. I’m also worried that we won’t have enough supply to meet the demand.” Since Ophellia had no previous experience, it was easy to make wrong decisions. When she first learnt about social enterprises in university, she was surprised to learn that doing business could help people, reallocate resources, and make a bigger impact than front-line social workers. However, seeing the increase in social enterprise competitions, she admitted that they are just competitions — the process can impress participants, but many of them just see it as an experience without really wanting to develop their ideas. Therefore, to develop social enterprises, it is better to incubate them, providing plenty of time and support.

It is normal to encounter difficulties when running a business. “I never aimed at making a lot of money. My greatest concern was not to lose money, but now I feel a bit tired.” This project has brought them collaboration invitations from as far away as Australia, and they have received support from many local organisations, so why is Ophellia tired? It turns out that they have met many structural barriers in the process. For example, the Correctional Services Department was very supportive of the project, but the actual implementation was not considered to be in the field of employment for rehabilitated persons, and no corresponding department was responsible for it, so nothing happened in the end. Some NGOs liked the concept but were unwilling to invest in the production of the product. “We need to take care of a lot of details. If we want to achieve sustainable development, we must look at it from the perspective of a business. If that’s the case, we may have to sell 100 pieces of clothes, but some things are meant to take time. For example, each interview takes a long time.”

Art is a kind of self-expression; painting a life story is a new experience for both the artists and the rehabilitated people. Almost two years have passed; Ophellia told us that the brand will have a new positioning,

moving from fashion to everyday products, and collaborating with various artists to launch products at major festivals. An example is the recent collaboration with local illustrator C Kong to launch a love-themed Christmas hand cream set with an American skincare brand. “More people use everyday products. I hope that apart from the stories, the products can also convey different messages.” Ophellia understands that advocating for “no labelling” sounds vague, and it is not something that can be done overnight, but she believes that it is a movement.

“To me, success is a qualitative impact. I didn’t think this communication process would have such a big impact on the artists — it’s a kind of empowerment.”

She hopes that before making any judgements, everyone can think carefully about whether what they know is the whole picture. She stressed: “Don’t judge before you listen to the story. Stay connected.”

“ Humans are smart and lazy creatures. Since childhood, we already know how to combine new knowledge with experience to reduce the time needed for processing information. But at the same time, this may lead to overgeneralisation and labelling. Ophellia Sin, a former registered social worker, quit her job to fight against labelling; she set up UNSPOKEN, working with designers to tell the stories of ex-prisoners and hoping that more people will learn to understand those around them.

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