

Stripping off the aura as a high-salary MBA strategy consultant to become a Montessori mom:
My interview with Cecilia Chan

In 2012, Cecilia completed her MBA with a full scholarship in the United States and graduated as the top 10% of class. Upon her graduation, Cecilia was hired by PwC, one of the world's top four accounting firms, as a Strategy Consultant. She said it was her dream job. Everyday she was using cutting edge technology to help the most powerful enterprises solve exciting problems. She also got to enjoy the latest apparel, walk in the prettiest stilettos, and work with a group of top echelon. However, after having her first daughter, she resolutely decided to give up the comfortable and high-paying position with a six-figure salary. She began her new role as a stay-at-home mother, and eventually started her rugged journey as an entrepreneur.

A change too radical to anticipate

Why did she give up her career and become a stay-at-home mom? The catalyst was a visa extension issue. "I received an email a week before my due date, telling me that my husband and I would not be able to work in the United States for the next 10 months. We were shocked, lost, and swamped with negativity. From six figures to zero dollars in income, it felt like we were dropped from the top of a tower," Cecilia said with a wry smile. Although the company promised her the same position plus a raise at the end of the 10 months, Cecilia eventually decided to give up this comfortable job, all for the sake of her sweet daughter.

From career woman to stay-at-home mother

She said, "It was a very difficult decision. I knew I could have made a great living and enjoyed career achievements, but I still chose to give up [on the offer]. Although I never regretted it, it was a real struggle even longer after the decision was made." At the time, she was drawn to entrepreneurship because of the flexible working hours and location, but startups don't pay much. "I had a six-figure job opportunity on one hand and nothing on the other."

Her voice cracked a little, "Whenever I looked at my baby girls, this sentence always comes to mind - 'I love you so much that I am willing to sacrifice *everything* for you.' In my mind, 'all' means more than just dedicating all our material property to them. 'All' means being willing to sacrifice rest, entertainment, and even every single moment of peace, on a daily basis." Before being a mother, Cecilia never thought she would evolve from a career woman to a stay-at-home mother, "I would like to be comfortable financially, travel, put on nice apparel, and dine at fine restaurants. But my love for my children surpasses all of such temporal enjoyment. These things no longer matter anymore. Because of my daughter, the decision became oddly easy."

If there were no visa issue, would she have embarked on a full-time mom-entrepreneur path? Cecilia said, "I would have probably moved to a human resources role and enjoyed working remotely. I would not have had the burning desire to be entrepreneurial. I am therefore forever grateful for this greatest trial in my life. I am grateful to this visa trial that inspired me to be a stay-at-home mother. I got to witness my daughters' development at every step. I also realized my potential and experience an explosive development in my professional life."

There is never enough time

As a stay-at-home mother with a four-year-old, a one-year-old, a husband receiving his doctorate in an extremely demanding Chiropractic school, and a startup, how on Earth does Cecilia manage her time? She said, "Even if I do not sleep, I don't have enough time to fulfill every single requirement for each of these roles. I have to constantly remind myself why I am doing this and what my priorities are. Homeschooling my 4-year-old, homekeeping, and managing the startups, in fact, can each be a full-time job. I therefore learned to put clear goals to every role I have. Any task not directly related to the goals will be ruthlessly removed from my to-do list."

Cecilia emphasized that her family must be her highest priority, and that her husband's schooling is more important than her own career achievements. This couple shares a clear common goal so when one is busy, the other would actively choose to be understanding and supportive. It is not easy. To her, this traditional "supportive wife" quality was not what she had in mind when she was young, as she grew up in the fiercely competitive Hong Kong culture. "I grew up witnessing lots of broken families struggle. I had no trust in a piece of marriage certificate. I developed a very "Hong Kong" expectation for my future family - get married in my 30's, focus on our careers separately, have one or two children and hire a babysitter. My sense of security would come from a job." Turns out she got married right upon college graduation. The decision thoroughly surprised her family, friends, and even herself. And homeschooling? If you talked to me 6 months ago, I would tell you I am not a homeschooler. I might even laugh at you (for thinking that I can)!"

Homeschooling her daughter the Montessori way

Cecilia decided not to send her daughter to a preschool and instead homeschooled her the Montessori way. She was often pleasantly surprised by her daughter's progress. "I only told my then-3-year-old daughter once about how the Moon reflects sunlight. One night, she took me to the window and said, 'Mammy, the Moon does not create light on its own. It just reflects the light from the Sun so we can see at night.' It was a strong epiphany moment for me. I realized how absorbent children's minds are."

Cecilia, with all her responsibilities, said she does not "entertain" her children. She actively develops their ability to learn independently and the experience turns out to be the catalyst for her development of Discover Talking Pen. "My daughter recently used a talking pen to read a 500-word Chinese book and recited the story perfectly soon after. However, there is a lack of good content in the English talking book industry. There is a strong unmet need."

Develop independent learners so mothers get some breathing time

The Discover Talking Pen aims to help children age 3 and above to learn the profound meaning and principles behind ordinary things, develop love of reading, and learn the authentic American accent. I am personally most intrigued by the fact that mothers can rest without turning on the TV.

Cecilia said, "Every month we send a richly educational *talking* book focusing on one ordinary item, e.g. water. We then explore biology, physical science, engineering, and mathematical principles we can extend from water. In order to give children a broader horizon of the world, we

also have a world awareness unit introducing water related events and landmarks around the world. For example, the Thai Songkran Festival and the Chinese water town Phoenix city. We also discuss water related jobs, environmental awareness principles and even financial management concepts in the life application unit." I went to their website and read the contents of the book. I found that Discover Wonders is really much richer than other children's books in the market. It is educational and filled with engaging illustrations!

Discover Talking Pen is accepting pre-orders in a worldwide Kickstarter campaign in February. Wherever you are in the world, sign up for their newsletter so you don't miss on this one-time-only launch special!

The greatest achievement in life

I curiously asked Cecilia as someone who stepped down from a life stage promised with spotlight and recognition, what her greatest life achievements were. She said, "Just like what my four-year-old daughter often says, 'We are broke but we are very happy.' I do not remember how many nights I cried myself to sleep, feeling like a failure. At those moments, I did not remember what international awards I have ever won or how much I used to make. The most important things I hung on to were that my daughters are very happy and that I have a great relationship with my husband. Because of my family and the Gospel, I can still live my life with a genuine smile.

"I believe in my choice. I can say without regret that I have done my best to teach my girls to grow up in righteousness. Everything else just does not matter. Looking at my girls, I know I am the beneficiary."

Postscript:

This is my first time crying as an interview host. Perhaps it was because Cecilia has a similar situation as my little family, I could not help the overflowing emotions from my own struggles! Cecilia and I met as we went to the same university. She and her husband were always the spotlight at school. I thought she was very bright, capable, and was the role model of many students (I was one of those little fans who watched her from afar)! Listening to her sharing her experience in the past few years touched me deeply. A woman being willing to give up on fame and a comfortable life to go through the most difficult moments with her husband is very romantic to me. This is why they enjoy a happy marriage regardless of whether they are in their highs or lows in life. If we only say with our lips "family comes first," but our actions and decisions do not change, it is impossible for us to achieve our goals of having a happy marriage and family. Maybe sometimes we just need a little bit of courage to make the right choices. I am therefore grateful for a good example like Cecilia's, who adds an extra drop of courage to those of us who may still be struggling.