A fitting job opportunity for single mothers
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Running an SME is challenging, even more so for a social enterprise balancing financial and social returns. In the third instalment of a four-part series profiling social enterprises in Singapore, Cheryl Lim talks to clothing alteration service provider A-changin, which empowers single mothers by hiring and training them in clothing alteration. Clothes alteration business fills niche in cottage industry

RETIRING in one's early 30s is something few can hope to do.

But for Ms Josephine Ng, 43, and her husband, Mr K.C. Ng, 45, it was their reward for almost a decade of hard work.

The couple set up and ran a successful integrated marketing agency and sold it for a tidy sum in 2001.

But their retirement plans took an unexpected back seat after they attended a talk at the National University of Singapore's Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy.

"We attended a talk and I was very motivated by the talks by foreign social enterprises. They shared about how they could start a sustainable company to constantly give back to society and that gave us the idea," said Ms Ng.

The couple went on to found A-changin, a high-quality sewing and alteration business in Singapore. It hires disadvantaged women, such as single mothers, and trains them in tailoring skills.

Single mothers were chosen as beneficiaries because of their limited access to support and help.

Starting a business that offers high-end clothing alteration services would not only equip single mothers with skills but also fill a gap in the market by introducing a modern twist to this cottage industry, said Ms Ng.

"There was nothing in terms of the high-quality standards that were needed for a lot of corporate personalities or socialites. These groups of people value good-quality alteration and want the alteration to follow the clothing's original finishing."

With the help of industry groups, voluntary welfare organisations and government associations, the Ngs assembled a team of five experienced professionals and single mothers.
Setting up shop in a central area was crucial if the business was to attract socialites and working professionals, she said.

But she said some shopping malls were hesitant about renting space to her because they thought the business would bring clutter and mess, tarnishing their images.

"They were afraid our social enterprise would fail because we might not be a sustainable business. Some of the mall owners also wanted twice the security deposit, and that made it hard for us as well," said Ms Ng.

But their detailed business proposal and concept won over SMRT, which allowed them to open their first outlet at Dhoby Xchange in January 2010. That outlet closed in February this year.

The company now operates two outlets, Alteration Initiative at Chevron House and Haute Alteration Initiative at Mandarin Gallery. Since then, they have also started offering a made-to-measure tailoring service.

Services cost $12 upwards to shorten the length of a pair of jeans and can run up to $2,000 to alter the fit of a couture gown.

Ms Ng said her experience in building a business from scratch helped. "Social enterprises have to operate with a sustainable business model and we know that real sustainability takes time. It's not about buying the cheapest equipment. We are investing in the people and the technology."

Ms Maryah Sharif, a single mother of three in her 30s, is one of the 30 staff. She started off as a part-time trainee seamstress but has since been promoted to a branch manager.

She said working with A-changin has been a challenge that she is glad to have taken up.

"I was initially reluctant to take this job and emotionally it's not easy because I have to balance my commitment to work with being a mother to my kids.

"But working here made me realise I can manage bosses, customers, colleagues and my kids."

While Ms Ng declined to reveal exact figures, she and her husband have so far sunk a high six-figure sum into the business.

The company pulled in a few hundred thousand dollars in revenue in the first year and this year's annual revenue is expected to be more than three times that figure.

The couple are in talks with several malls to open more outlets. A new lease has been signed for the Mandarin Gallery outlet, expanding it to three times the current space occupied.

A new sewing lab on Circular Road will also allow the business to take on more jobs and Ms Ng highlighted that this will support plans to contract alteration services out to luxury brands.

DBS Bank has been a part of the business every step of the way. The couple have a social enterprise banking package with the bank that includes a corporate current account with no
minimum deposit or minimum balance required. The bank is also talking to the couple about financing the social enterprise's expansion plans.

"We are providing this grant to A-changin because we believe in its social cause. The new sewing lab that A-changin is setting up with the help of the grant will improve productivity and create additional jobs," said Mr Lim Chu Chong, head of SME banking at DBS.