



Empowering people is most important because if you can empower them with information, they are better able to make decisions for themselves as they settle into their new home.

Cheng Goh

Using her own experiences as a newcomer to New Zealand, Cheng has helped others in the same situation find their place here. Making a difference in the community has always been important for her: *What I didn't know I wanted to find out, to understand, so that along the way I could share that knowledge or understanding with others.*

Cheng was born, or as she likes to say, 'Made in Malaysia', but today her roots are firmly in the North Shore. The younger of two children, she is a highly accomplished woman, with multiple qualifications, who speaks Malay and Hokkien (Chinese) and is fluent in English. Her leadership skills mean she is someone who is prepared to take risks and try new things.

At secondary school she started the school library, cataloguing over 2000 books and running the new library, and was also a school prefect. Cheng was keen to take on voluntary work during the school holidays. *I actually wanted to work with disabled children but transport was a problem. My parents were less enthusiastic about the idea because they were concerned about my safety.*

She had always wanted to live overseas and had the opportunity to complete her secondary education in Australia's Gold Coast. Cheng then graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Sciences from Melbourne's Monash University. It was at Monash that she met her husband-to-be, Jim, who was

studying for his Civil Engineering degree. It was some years before she and Jim married and while both had plans to return to work and live in Australia, family and work opportunities meant that did not happen.

Cheng moved to Sydney to undertake a postgraduate diploma in Food Technology and subsequently completed her Master of Biotechnology at New South Wales University. She had plans to pursue a PhD, but was called back to Malaysia by her mother. During her post-graduate studies, Cheng conducted research in dairy technology identifying phage-resistant cultures for the manufacture of milk products.

Back home, Cheng received an opportunity to join a Dutch-based dairy company based in Malaysia, as a management trainee. She accepted the offer without hesitation. It was in the area most close to her research interests with an added bonus of learning about marketing. Tasked with training and overseeing a national field team, the role involved a lot of travel, meeting medical



Cheng presenting at a medical symposium in Kuala Lumpur

professionals and retailers. One of Cheng's responsibilities involved organising medical symposiums in collaboration with the local medical association and the Ministry of Health. It was also in this role, that she was asked to write a childcare guide for new parents. *I was charged with overseeing a group of mothercraft nurses who worked with both government and private health sectors in the area of infant nutrition and promotion of dairy products.*

Through her travel into the rural areas around Malaysia, Cheng met local communities, including indigenous people and their families. She found them to be very warm and welcoming. It was a humbling experience as she witnessed how little some families had to live on.

After four years in the role, and with the feeling she needed to develop further, Cheng went on to work with pharmaceutical companies Boots Healthcare Company and Glaxo Smith Kline, managing healthcare and over-the-counter products such as Strepsils and Panadol.

It was purely by chance that she came to live in New Zealand, after dinner with an old acquaintance who shared news that they were emigrating to New Zealand. Cheng didn't know too much about life in New Zealand then but was intrigued with the idea of living there so she and Jim decided to apply as skilled migrants. Their application was accepted by Immigration New Zealand in a short space of time, but before making the final decision the family came for a holiday in May 2000. By the end of that visit they had decided to emigrate here.

However, the move was not immediate. Cheng felt a sense of responsibility to her employer, which meant that she gave the company two years' notice before leaving. Her family's reaction to the move was mixed but many of Cheng's relations had emigrated to other countries so it was not an unusual decision.

Cheng and her two children arrived in Auckland in November 2002, and settled in Birkenhead. Jim did not join the family as he continued working in Malaysia, but visited as often as he could.

Although she was given a few leads from her bosses in Malaysia, it was difficult and challenging to find employment suitable for her level of qualifications and experience. She suspects that it was because Auckland was not as culturally diverse in the early 2000s as it has become in recent years. *People were more interested in my ability to speak English than my experience and skills. It was frustrating. It used to get to me a fair bit.*

Cheng chose to look on these experiences as a newcomer as a way to broaden her life experience, and focused on adjusting to the new environment. However, not being able to find employment was frustrating. She was frequently told that she was not successful in her job application because she lacked Kiwi work experience. This is a common 'catch 22' situation which many migrants face. *When you come to New Zealand you are like a blank canvas. Whatever you are or what you have achieved back home—doesn't count for much. Here nobody knows you. When you go for a job interview, if you don't have a local network or Kiwi experience it's a struggle.*

Her involvement in community work began when she volunteered to teach English to new migrants with English Home Tutors (now English Language Partners) on the North Shore. *I'm inquisitive by nature. I'm always looking for something to do. I always see things as not just for me, but also for the people around me.* She taught students from all over the world at Meadowood Community House in Unsworth Heights. *I thrived on tutoring because I didn't feel so useless and I felt that I was doing something productive.* Cheng also volunteered at her children's school as a parent helper, helping children with their reading and artwork.

Eventually she secured her first paid job as a business interviewer, conducting phone interviews for an international research company in Takapuna. It was hard work and only casual employment. Cheng was disappointed that she could not find more permanent work. *I was operating mostly in an environment teaching newcomers English and it was very community based. In contrast, I was also trying to tap in to the business sector. It was difficult because employers wanted to know what you can bring to the role, and that you understand New Zealand but I didn't really have that then, as much as I read the newspapers.*

In 2004, Cheng decided to return to Malaysia to work. It was an opportunity to return to the commercial sector which she had missed. The package was attractive and the family was back together again, but after three years she chose to again return to New Zealand.



I'm very privileged. I often get to view situations from two different perspectives