

Fighting to stay balanced

Asia's top private equity professional, Apollo Global Management's Tan Chin Hwee, defines himself first as a family man and social advocate

By KAN KWOK LEONG

WHEN his firm's biggest client requested a meeting with him and his bosses in the United States, Tan Chin Hwee, the Singapore-based partner of Apollo Global Management, turned them down.

The reason: The meeting would have forced him to miss his daughter's fifth birthday.

He marked Kylie's birthday here and then flew off to meet the client, a day after the scheduled meeting.

The move was typical of the man whom many consider to be Asia's top private equity professional, the founding partner in Asia at Apollo, a New-York headquartered US\$115 billion alternative investment firm set up by Wall Street legend Leon Black in 1990.

In an industry where sacrificing the personal for the professional is considered par for the course, the 42-year-old has stood out for his dedication to his family and a concerted effort to give back to society.

He told BT in an interview: "I didn't say no out of arrogance, but I have never missed my three children's birthdays. I may be a top dog in a global firm, but my greatest achievement is my lovely wife and my three kids.

"We must be the person we want to be; so that we can inspire our kids."

Being with Kylie on her birthday was especially significant for him and his wife, Michelle Lee, 39. The girl, born prematurely at 27 weeks and weighing only 800g, had to fight for her life as a baby.

The experience inspired the Tans to set up two foundations dedicated to helping children. The couple have two other children, Brian, nine, and Sarah, four.

Mr Tan credits his parents and his wife – he describes her as his university sweetheart – above all others for his success.

"I have a wife who can run the

house properly, and that allows me to focus on my job."

His success in the industry is undisputed, having built an impressive track record and garnered numerous industry awards. He was named as a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader 2010; voted by *Hedge Fund Journal* as one of the top 40 emerging absolute-return investors globally; and honoured as the Best Asia Credit Hedge Fund Manager by Hong Kong-based publication *The Asset*.

His most recent accolade was this year's Distinguished Financial Industry Certified Professional (FICP) award from Singapore's Institute of Banking and Finance (IBF). He is also the new president of the CFA Society Singapore.

He joined Apollo in 2007 and started its Asian operations based out of Singapore after a career in finance at Keppel Corp, DBS Bank and US-based hedge fund managers Amaranth Advisors.

"After DBS, I joined Amaranth and rose through the ranks. I could succeed in the western world because it is purely performance driven. There are only three letters that matter – not MBA, not CFA, but P&L. It is purely meritocratic."

At Apollo, he and his team, which includes partner Girish Kumar, have completed close to 50 deals in private credits in the last six to seven years. "Our business is a local business, and our mantra is that we must invest in deals that can solve problems," he said.

Mr Tan's beliefs are contrary to the bottom-line focus of the financial industry.

"Sadly in finance, the value system is performance-based. It is tilted towards making money at all costs. But there must be a balance between a value-based and performance-based system.

"In finance, they pay too much money and that becomes reinforcement. Why should an engineer be paid so much less than a financial an-



Family matters: Mr Tan, with his wife Michelle Lee, and their children (from left) Kylie, Sarah and Brian. In an industry where sacrificing the personal for the professional is considered par for the course, Mr Tan has stood out for his dedication to his family.

alyst?" He believes that one of the greatest challenges of business today is creating a culture that is both value-centred and performance-driven; too many firms focus on performance and pay little attention to values. He cites Norges Bank Investment Management, Google and his former employer Keppel Corporation as organisations which are taking the lead in trying to balance both objectives.

To achieve that balance on a personal basis, he takes pains to draw boundaries between his work and personal lives.

"The business takes a lot out of you. I have done close to 100 deals in the last 10 years. You need to sustain a balance, but I always find that challenging. The only way you can achieve that is to set boundaries: I will not return calls till I've put the kids to sleep."

He supports a long list of social causes, such as by sitting on the boards of hospitals and volunteering his time teaching at the universities here.

He believes that more can be done to help Singaporeans who have not

benefited from the country's economic success. One idea that he proposes is to redistribute wealth by implementing a progressive a tax system – one that taxes the rich more.

"I can make such a proposal with a pure heart because I will be one of those who will be affected."

His desire to give back to society could stem from his humble upbringing in a lower-middle income family, and growing up in a meritocratic system that gave him three scholarships, including one that sponsored his MBA at Yale University.

"I was always among the top students in school. These scholarships gave me the chance to focus on my studies and worry less about helping my parents to provide for my two younger siblings."

He credits current Keppel Corporation CEO Choo Chiau Beng for giving him a scholarship in 1992, and the company's finance chief Teo Soon Hoe and treasury general manager Lynn Koh for giving him his break in finance by hiring him for Keppel's treasury department a few years later.

In the face of the finance indus-

try's many scandals in recent years, he urges the next generation of bankers and financiers to stick to their ideals: "You should never forget your ideals and your standards. Many of those from the younger generation start out idealistic, but once they get there and start earning a lot of money, they forget."

He believes that despite its recent troubles, the financial industry will continue to attract the best and the brightest, sometimes at the expense

of other industries. Yet, the industry needs to change if it is to remain relevant.

"Finance still creates a lot of wealth, and many people make an honest living from it – but it has to continue to evolve because if you don't change, you will become a dinosaur. The finance industry has always evolved, but it has to come from within. Governments can only do so much."

Extra-curricular activities

On top of his full-time job as a partner at global private equity firm Apollo Global Management, Tan Chin Hwee serves on the committees of community groups and other charities.

He is president of the CFA Society in Singapore and a member of the board of trustees for KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Lien Aid, a foundation associated with the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to address water and sanitation issues in Asia.

He has volunteered his time with regulators in Asia and the US on forensic accounting and is an adjunct professor to Masters-level students at the Singapore Management University, NTU and at Shanghai JiaoTong University.