GIVING BACK, SETTLING DOWN

Themin and Febrita Suwardy on juggling commitments, raising kids and giving back.

It's a sunny morning and Professor Themin Suwardy is busy running after precocious daughter Milla, three years old, while his wife, Febrita, is checking in on baby Ryssa. At first glance, it's a scene that's replicated in many settings across Singapore - young parents out with their two kids for weekend brunch. Except that we were at Food for Thought at the Singapore Botanic Gardens to shoot and interview the Suwardys. Managing kids and having to do a photo shoot is not something that most couples can do with aplomb, but the Suwardys pull it off.

LIFE CHANGES

"Your routine changes when you have kids," Themin, 41, reflects a few days later. "For us, that has been the greatest change." Adds Febrita, 37, "Before, if we wanted to travel somewhere, we'd buy the tickets, pack our bags and go. Provided of course, that we can take time off from work. It was easier because it was just the two of us.

"We'd time our travels when I had conferences. The idea was, it was just the two of us. But since we've had kids, we haven't travelled as much," says Themin. "Flexibility is also another thing that changes when you have kids. As Febrita says with a laugh, "Before, we used to eat out all the time or ta pau (meaning take away food) and sit in front of the TV to eat... (like any young couple)," her husband chimes in, but we don't do that anymore.

The Suwardys make sure the girls are first priority. "We make sure that one of us is always on hand to pick them up from infant care and childcare," says Themin.

LEARNING TO BE CITIZENS

But the Suwardys are not just learning the ropes of bringing up two young daughters, they also have yet to learn the intricacies of being Singaporeans. "We're not just young parents - we're also young Singaporeans. We are going through the whole process of learning the system," he says. "For example, my colleagues have been telling me that there are plenty of things to look forward to - like the Primary School Learning Examination and registration for schools and all the "fun" stuff that will happen when the kids start going to school that we don't know about yet." Born in Indonesia, the couple reflects on the fact that while they may look like citizens born here, they're not. "It is all this process that I think people here take for granted. When they look at us, they think we're native Singaporeans and they think you understand when, in fact, you're just as confused as anyone who is unfamiliar with the system," he says.

Adds Febrita, "When friends tell us the differences in schools - like, how this school is better than that school or why we should enroll the kids to a certain school,
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— THEMIN

they have all these anecdotes and we don’t. Learning to become good Singaporeans — as well as good Singaporean parents — is something that the couple is still going through. As Themin says, “We learn as we go along — and once the kids go to school, we’ll learn how to do it. But that’s part and parcel of being Singaporeans.”

STABLE HAVEN
Professionals who work at Singapore Management University (SMU) — Themin as a professor of accountancy and Febrina in the alumni relations office — the couple came to Singapore around 10 years ago. “Within a few months of each other,” as Febrina recounts, “I was educated here for a few years in a polytechnic. I moved here because I felt that it has a good mix of cultures and the main language is English. Singapore is so international and advanced. I thought it was the right place to further my career.”

Themmin’s experience was somewhat different from his wife’s. He already had a stable career in Melbourne when he was invited to Singapore by the new SMU to be part of its growth. “Coming to Singapore was a deliberate choice, because there was an opportunity to do something brand new. I think that if you are young and you get an opportunity to do things for the community and for the society, cliché as it may be, you have to do it.” Themin also felt that Singapore was a good place to build a career, having worked in his native Indonesia and Melbourne before settling in Singapore. “At that time, I wasn’t really thinking of settling down. Honestly, when I first came, I gave it 15 years. I thought it would be just nice — study, start a career... that was what I was thinking. I mean, with a new university, you really don’t know what’s going to happen. Fit may be an issue and other things could have gone wrong. Luckily, nothing did.”

But then, he met me a few months later,” Febrina interrupts, laughing. In many ways, their story as a couple also reflects their journey to becoming citizens. “We got married after we got our Permanent Residency status,” recounts Febrina and they became citizens in 2006. “For us, Singapore is a stable haven, good to have kids. So when we got married, we were definitely sure that we wanted to have a family here.”

GIVING BACK
Having settled into domesticity, the couple agrees that Singapore was the right decision for both of them. “Things worked out,” says Themin. “Having a place we can call home is symbolic in many ways. It’s the place we wanted to settle down in.” Work and family are not the only things keeping the Suwardys occupied. In 2009, they initiated a foundation called Community Services Project, wherein they give monetary grants to individuals or organisations that want to set up grassroots programmes in their communities.

Themmin recounted how the idea for their pet project came about: “I would give about six weekends a year to a Certified Public Accountancy workshop for accountancy...
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professionals — and I would always come home tired, with no voice. I work hard to be a good teacher, I move a lot, I speak a lot... so by the end of the day, I was so tired because I was standing all day and I’d complain to my wife.” One day, at a break from teaching, while messaging Febrita, he reflected that the only thing that kept him going was thinking that what he was doing was community service. “And she said, ‘How can you say it’s community service when you get paid for it?’” I mean, the workshop was basically free, but I receive a small fee for my services.” This planted the idea for the project. “It was our brainchild, but she was the one who said that we should give back. It became our thing.” But how to give back? That was a question that initially stymied the couple.

HELPING THOSE WHO HELP
“We just didn’t want to give money and be done with it,” says Themin. “We wanted to create a ripple effect.” Febrita chimes in, to which Themin adds, “This is where my experience in academic helps. I know of students who did community work on top of their studies. So we thought, why not help students who help people.”

Started three years ago, the Community Services Project awards a financial grant to students for their extra-curricular community projects. Since the project started, they have funded about 60 students who have in turn helped communities with their community programmes. Themin and Febrita themselves look through the applications, the proposals, as well as the beneficiaries and decide who is eligible.

“The dean of students office shortlists all eligible applicants and we pick based on the projects,” says Febrita. “But we made it a point that the students must have completed their community services requirement before applying for this grant. They can’t use this to fulfill their course requirements.” This assures them that they are funding those who are really interested in giving back to the community. “This is for people who are doing extra,” they say. Compared to other organisations that donate millions to community causes, the Suwardys consider what they’re doing to be on the small scale. But the impetus to help out comes from the right place — and it is this willingness to help out in their own little way that makes them stand out.

A MEANINGFUL PROJECT
“When we first started this, we wanted it to be anonymous,” says Themin. “But good work has a way of getting known, as the Suwardys found out. “One day, my wife’s phone rang. The person at the other said, ‘Hi, I’m from Forbes.’ You know what Febrita said? ‘No, we’re not interested in a subscription!’” The couple laughs as they recount the story. Turns out, Forbes magazine had called to interview the couple. Febrita laughs and continues the story. “I was going to hang up and the person said, ‘I’m the editor of Forbes magazine and I’m not selling you anything. I want to interview you.” The magazine had heard about the Suwardys’ efforts and had included them in the magazine’s annual Forbes Heroes of Philanthropy. Reflecting on their inclusion, Themin says, “Our efforts were so small compared to the others on the list. But for us, it was meaningful. We were happy that a small thing the two of us thought of was recognised. For us, it was never about the money.” Febrita adds, “We just give as much as we can give. For us, it was about creating ripples and making an impact on the community.”

In effect, the project was their first “baby”, conceived before their firstborn. Asked about why they even thought of doing it when they could have easily lived their lives like many young parents do, Themin has this to say: “We had decided to do this even before we had Milla. We signed the agreement when my wife was pregnant in 2009. I felt that we had gotten so much out of Singapore. It has given us a life, opportunities and a chance to make a difference. It was the right thing to do.”

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— FEBRITA