

Slum angels

Denis and Leela Singaram Champ set up a school in Zambia to help children there break free of the poverty cycle



► Tan Dawn Wei

IT'S a long way from living the pampered life of a wife of an oil industry executive, to sitting on a dirt floor in Africa teaching slum kids with Aids how to read.

Yet at 50 years old, a Singaporean woman is doing just that.

To the kids of the Buseko slums, a dusty shanty town in the capital city of Lusaka, Zambia, Leela Singaram Champ is probably a god-send.

Before the wisp-thin foreigner appeared one day and built a school on the land they were squatting on, residents there – much like the rest of the country's population – were living with no way out of the vicious circle of Aids, single parenthood and poverty.

However, Leela's own existence at one stage seemed a far cry from the charitable direction it eventually took.

She and her French husband, Denis, 56 – they met in 1986 in Singapore through mutual friends and got married in 1990 – had, by her own admission, “a very comfortable expat life” of chauffeured cars and golf games.

He had been general manager of American company Baker Hughes Inteq, which provides oil industry drilling services, for 10 years. For five years, he was also general manager for French multinational company, International SOS – which provides global medical assistance – in Nigeria and Vietnam.

Leela herself was a sales and marketing training

consultant for McGraw-Hill International Training Systems, part of the worldwide publishing empire, for seven years; taught at the French and American international schools in Indonesia and Africa; and was also the sales and marketing manager of International SOS.

The pair retired in 2001.

But how did the couple – who have no children of their own – end up doing humanitarian work in tough surroundings?

Leela says: “I thought, instead of looking for another job and making someone rich richer, why not put my skills to giving back to the needy?”

Indeed, when Denis retired, he accepted a job by an American non-governmental organisation (NGO) to set up a care centre for children with Aids in Zambia.

But the African experience opened their eyes to how NGOs were run, something that left them “disappointed”.

“Eighty per cent of the funds was going to operations and 20 per cent going to where the need was. I felt that was wrong,” Leela says.

When her husband, who used to drive by a shanty town called Buseko to pay rent to the care centre's landlady, told her about the slum there, she had to see it for herself.

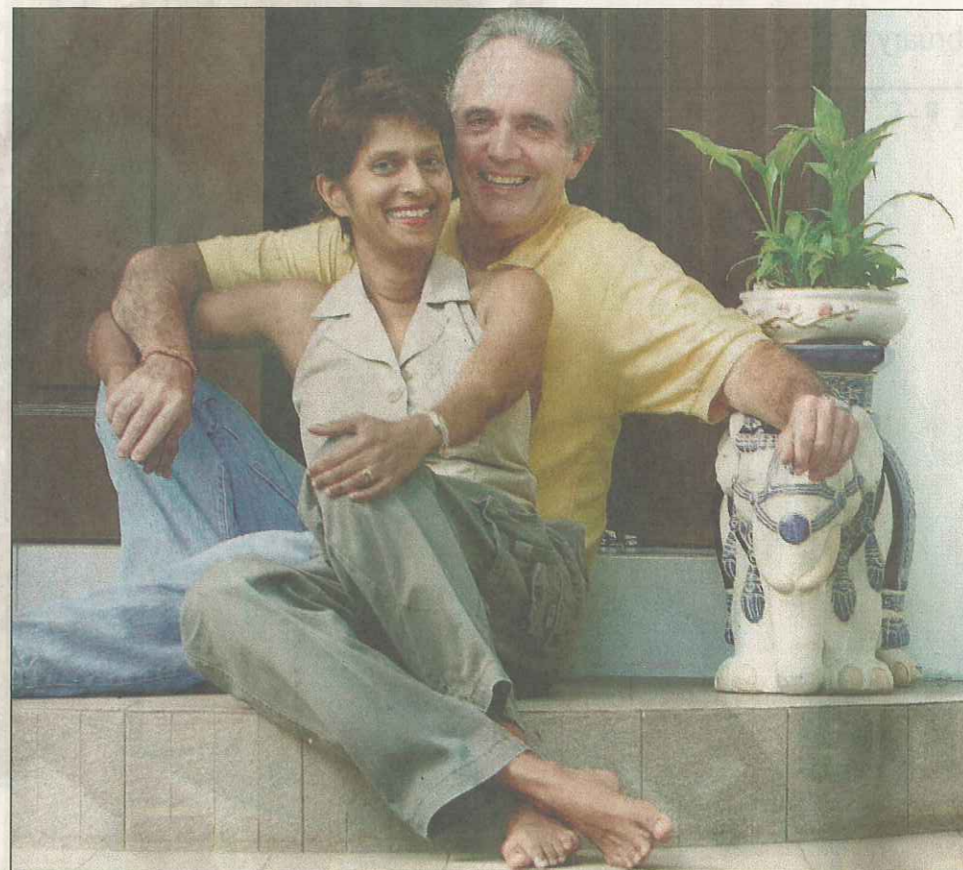
There, she saw squatters living in tiny makeshift tents – nothing more than plastic sheets held up by poles – and with no electricity or water.

Some tents, measuring just 2 by 3m, were housing as many as eight family members.

When the rainy season came, residents would find themselves knee deep in water. “They practically have to sleep standing up,” says Leela.

Education was the first step in helping to change their lives, thought Leela, who approached and got approval from the slum's landowner to start a school there.

She took over an old church on the land and started out teaching the children herself, sitting on the bare floor since they had no tables, chairs or even a chalkboard.



PHOTOS: ALAN LIM, DENIS CHAMP

PROJECT AID:

Denis and Leela Singaram Champ left behind a comfortable executive lifestyle to start a school for children in a Zambian slum (inset).

“Maybe it's in the genes,” she says of her love for humanitarian work.

Her father, Nadaison Singaram, a first-generation Singaporean whose family was from Chidambaram in the south of India, devoted much of his life to grassroots work.

Leela's goal for her school is to get the slum kids to complete the grade 7 state exams, which is equivalent to Singapore's Primary School Leaving Examination.

Besides English, mathematics and social science classes for children and teenagers, she also runs an adult literacy programme with students as old as 50 who can't read.

When word spread about the school, children who lived as far as 12km away began coming.

From 25 kids last June, the school, subsisting on about US\$2,000 (S\$3,071) a month from the Champs' own pockets, has grown to 70 children and adults now.

Half of the students there are HIV-positive. In fact, one in five children in Zambia are orphaned because of Aids and 25 per cent of Zambians are HIV-positive.

The teachers, now numbering four, also come from the community and are paid the equivalent of

\$50 a month.

Besides classes, Leela also started a weekly feeding programme by giving out high-protein porridge to the slum residents because quite often “this is all they get”.

She says she has never actively sought help from friends or organisations. But there have been some pleasant surprises.

One friend hooked her up with an executive at Singapore Airlines, which donated 1,000 of its used fire-retardant blankets.

Another French donor, a partner in a big oil field logistics company, also stepped in with a US\$10,000 cash donation.

She doesn't have any long-term plans for the school, but for now, her focus is on caring for her surrogate children.

As she says: “I read somewhere that the Papua New Guinea High Commissioner to the United Kingdom said she first learnt how to write on sand. So who knows what these kids will become?”

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