

A Gem in the Rough

The High Flyer on
a Different Path

By John McNamire
Images courtesy of the JEM Group

Janet Middlemiss is not your average 30 something. Born to a Singaporean mother and English father, the ambitious entrepreneur and philanthropist proudly stands as the CEO of the JEM Group, a social enterprise headquartered in Hong Kong that is today spearheading a unique global initiative to empower any person from any walk of life with the knowledge, skills and confidence to take their ideas and make them happen.

Unlike most people who set up their own business for the conventional reasons of money, power and freedom, Middlemiss is one of a growing breed of social entrepreneur whose key objectives are not solely turnover and profit, but are about introducing practical, sustainable solutions that create social value. Where most businesses typically measure performance in returns and profits, social enterprises assess success in terms of their impact on society. It is therefore little wonder that social entrepreneurs are often driven by

powerful ideas to improve people's lives and Middlemiss is no different.

Perhaps better known for her work as a former public relations consultant, on speaking with Middlemiss it is immediately apparent that she has a unique approach to both life and business. She says, "All I am doing is being the person I want to be. If what I achieve does not have a social benefit, I do not see any reason for getting out of bed in the mornings. In my mind, business is about creating new things and changing the world for the better. In fact, there is no point getting up unless you are going to make a positive difference in the lives of others."

Having said this, Middlemiss is the first to confess that she did not always feel this way. She spent two decades as a high flying public relations stereotype, and although she says her experience during twenty years in corporate life was thoroughly enjoying, she admits during her latter years in PR she felt drawn to doing something more inspiring.

In her former role, Middlemiss recalls spending her days trapped in an office, bogged down with endless proposals and presentations, frustrated by the predictable path stretching out in front of her. She realized that if her own life was a story, she would not read it. In fact, it would bore her to tears. "I could have continued indefinitely with a comfortable lifestyle and all consuming corporate career," says Middlemiss, "However, I wanted something more lasting and fulfilling. If you like a life that would stand for something that I could proudly reflect upon as I got older."

As is often the case with such revelations, it was witnessing conditions on the ground that persuaded Middlemiss to re-consider a new direction and to dedicate herself to something more inspiring. Her wakeup call originated on a trip to Africa where she travelled from the northern tips of Zimbabwe over the border into Zambia and then onto Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya. "I have no idea why but from a very early

age I have always had a fascination with Africa and camping across the continent was a must do for me," says the 37 year old.

Middlemiss recollects that it was her trip to Africa that convinced her of what she needed to do next. She talks vividly about the hardship she encountered from observing a child with little more than the hind bone of an ox with which to play, to visiting communities where schools operate with the minimum of resources, if there was indeed a school for children to attend. "I remember visiting a school in Malawi where the teacher said he hoped I would return home and spread the word of the plight for better schools in Africa. From that day forward, I felt a sense of responsibility to help these communities but at the time, admittedly, I had no idea how, let alone when."

Although it was several years until her dream was to fully materialize, Middlemiss says that on her return to Hong Kong she could not stop thinking about her experiences in Africa which she attributes as the catalyst for establishing JEM. "During the trip, travelling on an overland bus through Malawi, I remember experiencing a sudden expansion of my awareness, where for a brief moment of perfect clarity, I felt what it was like to feel truly alive. In fact, I can remember being struck by a terrifying realization that my life had gotten off course, and that I was really meant to be doing something totally different."

When Middlemiss returned home, she started to wonder what she was doing every day and what effect it was having on the world. She became more aware of certain issues and was getting the strong impression that she could do something about them. Nonetheless, on returning to the normality of daily life, she was conscious that people around her were not seeing what she saw, or at

least not with the same degree of responsibility. "This made it easy to slip back into the status quo, but no matter how much I tried, I could no longer find satisfaction in my old life," she continues.

Disarmingly, Middlemiss points out that her tipping point came when she became increasingly aware that



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in a few years she would be forty, and given that she was not getting any younger, she had to do something now or risk running out of time. Faced with the realization that she wanted to carve out her own niche and be doing something where she could help other people, she explains that she came up with the idea for JEM when she began studying the lives of individuals who had broken free of the mould and usual

expectations of society.

"In search of answers for myself, I started a research project examining people who were focusing their attention and efforts on things that really mattered to them and in the process were achieving extraordinary results," she comments. "Truth be told, I was really trying to get a better understanding of how to re-organize my own life, to get out of the rat race, and to focus on what mattered most."

As it transpired, Middlemiss was to discover so much more. On closer investigation of those that were succeeding in ways that she regarded to be over and above what is usually considered normal, she began to identify various patterns and behaviors of success, including the fact that super-achievers not only focus on what they love doing, they also take great care as to how they organize their lives and make particular choices.

She explains, "In short, these people live deliberately by choice, as opposed to by chance. Their success is therefore neither accidental nor a matter of luck. Most have focused their minds on exactly what they want their lives to be about and what they wish to achieve. They have then effectively taken the necessary actions and steps to work towards their unique purpose and aspirations - without the distraction of other priorities."

Critically, Middlemiss remarks that as human beings we will only ever do something to the best of our abilities for one reason only, and that is if we want to. "It is alarming to think that only a handful of people are ever totally engaged and fulfilled by how they spend their time. I know so many people who don't enjoy their jobs preferring to view work as a means to a financial end. In consequence, there are countless people with huge dreams and creative ideas bottled up inside who instead of focusing on how they are going to make their dreams real, worry about the anguish of daily life. When this



Even children from the poorest of backgrounds have big dreams says Middlemiss.

starts to happen, it is easy to feel a victim of circumstance without any real choice or control over life.”

It is for this reason that Middlemiss is now preparing her most ambitious project to date, which entitled JEM, is an independent think tank and social enterprise that is devoted to developing human potential by cultivating aspiring creative talent.

“Being able to help someone accomplish their goals is what I’ve always wanted to do,” says Middlemiss, “and knowing there are so many talented people out there, we wanted to offer an approachable and affordable facility for them to explore and develop their creative talent and passions whether it is to become a chef, start a

business, make their mark in the world of sports, music, fashion or drama, or instigate a not-for-profit cause.”

Middlemiss remarks that talent all too often still goes largely unspotted in schools since most education systems continue to deliver an academic hierarchy of subjects, where not only are traditional topics such as languages, mathematics and sciences valued over creative disciplines such as music and the arts, but students have to adapt themselves to a set syllabus, instead of the curriculum helping students discover, develop and explore what they have a natural affinity for and enjoy.

“As a result, school prepares most of us to get a job and many of us actually end up leaving without

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really knowing what we are good at. It is therefore little wonder that by the time we get to our thirties, forties and fifties, even though we may have built a successful career, we are still left with aspirations that are largely unfulfilled.”

It is with this disparity in mind, and the fact that many people who have a burning creative desire whether it be to become a published author, dancer or a photographer have no idea where to start, that JEM was set up to provide a platform where not only young people but anyone of any age who has a creative ambition can turn to seek information, network with like-minded individuals, and have access to successful mentors in their field.

Says Middlemiss, “Through our initiatives, our hope is that new ideas will surface and that the next generation of great thinkers, business leaders, artists, sports personalities, musicians,



Middlemiss receives a warm welcome from local children on a return trip to Africa this year.

humanitarians and even world changers will be inspired to emerge.

“What is more, if we can support people in the exploration and development of their creative ideas, including what they do naturally well and for which they have a passion, we might not only achieve far more than we ever imagined, we will also have the potential for higher attainment and fulfillment that can yield positive repercussions for our health, happiness and well-being, not to mention the welfare of our organizations and work places.”

Given the immensity of the task, when asked about her suitability Middlemiss modestly comments, “I am not sure that I am the best qualified person, but what I do know is that I feel a strong sense of responsibility to give this a go.”

She also feels that the timing is right given that as a society we are experiencing the impact of the

emotional economy where there is a greater need for us to feel good about ourselves. She says, “This is likely to create all sorts of opportunities as we will be more prone to pursue activities that make us feel good, for which we are passionate, and which enable us to contribute positively.”

At the end of the day, Middlemiss points out that, by and large, all she is really doing is re-connecting with the things she remembers wanting to do with her life when she was very young and before she had been conditioned by society. As a child, she was always up to something that involved making money to spotlight social causes whether it be organizing entrepreneurial fundraisers from fashion shows and culinary projects, to managing the school’s initiatives around Band Aid. “I guess even then I was a kind of social entrepreneur but the term hadn’t been invented yet.”

And what about Africa? Well, in

the spirit of enriching people’s lives, Middlemiss states that an integral principle of JEM is to raise awareness and funds for specific learning and development programmes around the world which the group achieves by matching each of its initiatives with a social action cause. Unsurprisingly, she is therefore also working on a book for which a percentage of the proceeds will be dedicated to one of her lifelong goals – to build a school in Africa.

“Talent manifests and expresses itself differently in every individual and, as such, our vision is to make a positive difference in the world by contributing to the development of a healthy society where people are given the opportunity to use their creative talents and tremendous natural capacities to live their potential.”

Subsequently, it is a concept of great importance to Middlemiss who deems that it is only by helping others that we can truly help ourselves. ■