

# READY, SET, CHANGE!

*VOICES meets four professionals who have put their past behind them and taken the plunge into new fields.* **TEXT JUNE CHEONG PHOTO DAN ONG**

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**SHE SURVIVED CANCER** but not her boss' discrimination. Entrepreneur Simone Vaz was retrenched from her telecommunications job in Shanghai when she was battling breast cancer.

She said: "When I was being treated, my boss wouldn't take my calls. He'd arrange meetings when he knew I was out having chemotherapy."

After she lost her job, Ms Vaz, who is in her 40s, found it tough going to find another. Headhunters told her that with her condition, it would be almost impossible. So she decided to hire herself.

She set up Lusher Than Life (<http://lusherthanlife.wordpress.com>), a macrobiotic counseling firm, last November, mining her personal experience of cancer to guide others through their battle with the disease.

She is not alone in turning a dire situation on its head by starting anew in these hard times. So did engineer Juraimi Rahmat, when his employer shut its doors last year.

He, too, used the situation for self-renewal. He became a lifestyle coach and set up his own engineering company.

He said: "To me, the best opportunity to do something is during bad times."

A lifestyle coach provides solutions – in terms of diet, exercise and so on – to help a person bridge the gap between what he wants to be and what he is.

He got interested in the work when his efforts to help his mother change her lifestyle saw a reduction in her cancerous tumours, which had not responded to chemotherapy.

He is now setting up a wellness website. Meanwhile, his engineering firm provides products which are certified environmentally friendly.

He said: "I believe it's kind of like karma. All of us are forms of energy. If we harm the environment, it'll come back to us."

Asked if it was difficult to go into business without any experience, he said: "In business, there's only risk.

You don't know until you try."

Ms Vaz has the same positive outlook. It led her to study to become a certified macrobiotic counselor. She supplements her new course as a freelance public relations consultant.

She said: "When I suffered no side effects during my chemotherapy, I realised it was due to my switching to the macrobiotic diet. Even my oncologist was amazed I went through my treatments so well."

The diet is low-fat, high-fibre, predominantly vegetarian and emphasises whole grains. As a counsellor, a trained professional, she helps people onto the diet and to stay on it.

Not only does her new career allow her to help others it has also taught her things about herself and her potential.

She said: "When you have a job, you're quite spoilt. You're going to get paid whether you turn in good work or not. I have to work 24/7, but it's okay as I enjoy what I'm doing."

Leaving a familiar environment



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03 Juraimi Rahmat

04 Benjamin Wong, 40

**“You may not be in your comfort zone as you have to adjust to new colleagues and a new environment. So you have to adjust yourself.”**

Ms Ngan Chin Shia, 31, administrative assistant in a nurse recruitment agency

can be both scary and liberating. Just ask banker turned baker Benjamin Wong, 40, and Ms Ngan Chin Shia, 31, who left the finance industry to work in a nurse recruitment agency.

Mr Wong said: “Your schedule is really flexible. You can go to the gym at 3pm but you have to work on weekends; and you have to think about packaging, marketing, taste testing and all that. I work much harder now.”

Ms Ngan said: “My previous job involved data entry and answering phone calls. In my new job, I have to meet customers, strangers, face to face every day.”

Mr Wong, who started baking seriously in 2007, quit his banking job of 15 years last November to set up his own business ([www.totallylusciouscakes.blogspot.com](http://www.totallylusciouscakes.blogspot.com)). He still takes classes to improve

his craft.

He said: “It’s been a roller coaster ride. There are days when I feel excited because I’ve come up with a new recipe and others when I’m down because of negative feedback or I feel there’s too much competition. At the end, you have to be strong and take things in your stride.”

Ms Ngan advised keeping upbeat and taking the initiative when the going gets tough. She found her current position as an administrative assistant in a nurse recruitment agency through Central Singapore CDC after a year’s fruitless search.

As the industry is still new to her, she makes it a point to read health magazines and health stories in the newspapers to understand medical jargon and explain medical terms to clients.

Besides liking what you spend most of your waking hours doing, she emphasised the need for humility and an open mind when it comes to forging a new career path.

She warned: “You may not be in your comfort zone as you have to adjust to new colleagues and a new environment. So you have to adjust yourself.”

This is certainly something all four have had to do in the financial area too.

Mr Wong who used to draw a five-figure salary, counts himself lucky if he takes home a three-digit sum. Mr Juraimi, who now earns half of the \$4,500 he used to command, said: “When you’re starting out in business, not being paid is a reality.”

But noted Mr Wong: “Now I’m just concentrating on the things I truly enjoy.”