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Winning mix of business and social needs

here, many are asking – rightly – how they can sustain themselves financially.

For a start, awards like the DHL-Yes one help raise awareness of the possibilities behind social entrepreneurship.

Express and logistics company DHL hopes that the award will also create a platform for social entrepreneurs to share best practices and resources within the region.

To be eligible to take part, the entrant's business must address at least one of the United Nations' development goals: eradication of poverty, making primary education universal, promoting gender equality and empowering women, among them.

Mrs Ng's Bridge Learning impressed the judges with its dedication to helping children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, autism and attention-deficit disorder.

The students there, aged between 2½ and 16, go to mainstream schools and attend Bridge on the side. Besides reading, writing and numbers, they are trained in appropriate behaviour.

In the last four years, Bridge has screened over 1,000 children for learning difficulties and disabilities.

It now has about 100 students in the 10 programmes at its Chua Chu Kang and Clemenceau Avenue North centres. Its 13 teachers are trained in-house.

On its fees being lower than at other private special schools, Mrs Ng said: "We are not cheap, dirty and smelly. We could charge as much as private companies too, but the difference is that our profits are pumped back into social causes."

Her work had humble beginnings. The petite, feisty woman quit her job as a primary school teacher on seeing how children with learning disabilities were often tagged as naughty, stupid or lazy.

She then enrolled herself in a bachelor's programme in special education at Adelaide's Flinders University, where she is now pursuing a master's degree in the subject.

She is married to junior college teacher Ng Eong-Sian, 35, who shares her passion for the cause.

The couple have no chil-



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PUMPING BACK PROFITS

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MRS AREENA NG (above), founder and executive director of Bridge Learning, a school that helps children with learning disabilities. She is seen here guiding students with neuro exercises, which stimulate developmental thinking through physical exercise. Mrs Ng is the winner of the DHL Young Entrepreneurs for Sustainability (Yes) Award and will represent Singapore in the Asia-Pacific round, to be held later this month.

dren, but their "baby" is a \$10,000 trust fund from their own savings, which will eventually fund the building of orphanages and schools in Third World countries.

The first runner-up in the DHL-Yes awards was Mr Kenny Low, 31, who runs City Harvest Education Centre, a non-profit private school providing affordable education to those taking the GCE N- and O-level examinations privately.

The school received \$300,000 in seed funding from City Harvest Church, but is independent and non-religious, said Mr Low.

Annual student fees, pegged at \$4,000 to \$5,000, are competitive with market rates, which range from \$2,000 to \$10,000.

But unlike private schools, its profits are channelled into bursaries for needy students.

The third finalist was Mr Wilson Ang, who heads Environmental Challenge Organisation (ECO) Singapore, a local youth-outreach environmental group.

The 25-year-old quit his job as an air force officer a year ago to organise youngsters into anti-littering squads, among other efforts, buoyed by the need to be focused on "ensuring our planet's sustainability".

ECO Singapore, which is 4½ years old, adopted a social entrepreneurship model in June last year, when it realised that leaning on donations from the public was not sustainable "because you're subjected to people's mood", said Mr Ang.

Today, it sustains itself with revenue earned from magazine advertisements, the sale of corporate gifts, corporate training and school talks.

National Kidney Foundation

chairman Gerard Ee, one of the judges, commended the work of the three winners, but felt that Bridge Learning stood out because there were only a few services tackling learning disabilities here, and these were also expensive.

Bridge Learning, on its part, tries to limit spending by making its teaching materials instead of buying them.

It cannot afford to pay attractive salaries, but then again, because its teachers are "really people with character and passion", it has been able to find the staff it needs, said Mrs Ng.

Running a business with a social mission breaks the "mentality of passive taking", she said, adding: "Generally, people don't like to receive handouts. If they can be self-sustaining, they will live with a greater sense of human dignity."

arlina@sph.com.sg