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### **Animal Protector**

*By Frankie Chee*

In his trade to fight illegal wildlife trade in Singapore, Mr Louis Ng endured death threats his front door splattered with red paints and his van window smashed. Mr Ng founder of Animal Concern Research and Education- the first of its kind here is located at a sprawling 2 ht land at Jalan Lekar among a cluster of fish farms and nurseries near Chua Chu Kang.

The location is also a new headquarters for the society.

The opening of the non-government centre, which will take in reptile and amphibians rescued from smuggler and owner who keeps them illegally is a milestone for Mr Ng who has toiled for his cause.

The \$500,000 currently only has one animal occupant- a star tortoise left at the centre's gate – but it his early days. Yet Mr Ng already has plans to open another centre in Malaysia, and offices in other countries.

The opening of the centre is a far cry from Acres' humble beginnings in a small office with two tables at the Golden Mile Complex. The organization was registered in 2001.

Since then, Mr Ng has worked to uncover evidence of the illegal wildlife trade here.

The animal lover – his HDB apartment in Jurong West that he shares with his wife and fellow Acres worker Amy Corrigan is currently home to a dog with a deformed leg that he found abandoned – has petitioned for wildlife causes ceaselessly.

He has also pushed for legislation changes on endangered species.

And he has achieved much. Acres has successfully lobbied for the penalty for wildlife smuggling to be increased from \$5,000 to \$50,000, and has also worked to persuade the upcoming Resorts World in Sentosa to drop its plans to import whale sharks as an attraction.

And, more than just talk, the staff and volunteers at Acres actively get their hands dirty by posing as buyers of illegal wildlife or wildlife products and gathering evidence against them using hidden cameras, then handing these over to the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA).

“We don't want to just leave it to the authorities to handle the problem, we want to actively participate in solving it,” he explains.

Some of Acres' achievements include the rescue of a rare South African vervet monkey locked in a factory in 2003, the seizure of 11 animals of several different species kept by a man in his bedroom in 2001 and bringing about a drop in the number of traditional Chinese medicine shops illegally selling bear bile and gall bladders after an undercover stint the same year.

For all his efforts, Ng is paid only \$1,600 a month, while wife Amy, 32, the director of education, receives \$400 less. The rest of the seven staff gets between \$500 and \$1,600.

Mr Ng, who has no children yet, admits, “There are some drawbacks to this job but we are passionate enough about our work not to be concerned by them. We’re one of the most dedicated teams around and my colleagues and I are not here for the money, but to make a difference. “

Indeed, the charity-funded society has had to struggle with money as the majority of its funds come from donations, with government grants and corporate contributions making up the rest.

The society’s operating costs are between \$400,000 and \$500,000 annually, while its new Wildlife Rescue Centre needs about \$20,000 a month.

“The bulk of our money comes from the man on the street, the \$5 or \$10 donations. So it takes a lot of effort to raise the funds,” he says.

He recalls how he raised funds during Acres’ early years through “sheer perseverance” by cold-calling companies. That is how he got an initial \$8,000 from the Lee Foundation. And, in 2005, with only \$8,000 in Acres’ bank account, the gutsy young man had to call donors and beg for money.

Today, the society has 18,000 supporters in its database.

Money aside, he also faced initial criticisms and skepticism. Even his parents, retired civil servant Angela Quek, 60, and sales manager Robert Ng, 61, were upset that the younger of two children, a National University of Singapore biology graduate, went down this path and had a starting pay of only \$500.

But, after successfully campaigning for a baby chimpanzee, used by the zoo for photo-taking sessions, to be returned to its mother, he realized that he would have to speak up against cruelty to animals beyond the usual dogs and cats.

He recalls: “It was a challenge in the beginning because we were starting something new, and we were not going to just rescue animals but also change people’s mindset.”

Through roadshows and campaigns, he showed that Acres is not just another society fighting animal cruelty but is also trying to put an end to the illegal wildlife trade, which is estimated to be worth US\$10 billion (S\$14.5 billion) worldwide. He raises awareness of the problem at these events.

“Acres can’t do everything, we need to get the public involved. If we can get four million Singaporeans to be our eyes, we can wipe out the illegal wildlife trade,” he stresses.

So there are still acres of work ahead for the animal rights group which has made its presence felt here.

“It’s a continuing process. After eight years of our work here, people now believe we’re here to stay because we have a proper focus,” he says.