

WHO'S WHO

at the new Aware... and the questions they will not answer

AT AWARE'S March 28 annual general meeting, Mrs Claire Nazar was elected president, but she resigned a few days later. The 11-member executive council comprises nine new faces and two older members. Aware released some information about the women in charge, but there were some details it refused to supply when asked.

- It would not confirm when they joined Aware as members. The Straits Times understands that except for Jenica Chua who joined in 2007, the other newcomers joined in the last five months.
- It would not say if the newcomers knew each other prior to standing for election.
- It would not say how they were connected to the large number of new members who attended the AGM and elected them by wide majorities.
- It would not reveal their religions.
- It would not reveal the marital status or other family details of some of the women.
- It would not allow interviews with any of them. Aside from the statements issued by Aware, the new leaders have remained uncontactable since news of the AGM drama broke.

JOSIE LAU MENG LEE, 48, PRESIDENT

She is DBS Bank's vice president and head of marketing for consumer banking group cards and unsecured loans. Her job includes driving retail usage on the credit/debit cards, through partnerships with stores. Before joining DBS in 2004, she was with the Singapore Tourism Board for more than 15 years, largely in marketing lifestyle

events such as the Singapore Food Festival, Great Singapore Sale and World Gourmet Summit.

She is married to Dr Alan Chin, a doctor in private practice with a string of clinics. They have two daughters aged 17 and 15. Ms Lau joined Aware in January this year.



CHARLOTTE WONG HOCK SOON, 63, VICE PRESIDENT

The principal of Renewal Organisation Effectiveness, a consulting business, she is a former teacher and sociology and anthropology lecturer. Married with two children, she has a PhD from the University of Kent at Canterbury UK, and worked for ExxonMobil for 21 years as the Recruitment, Training and Organisational Effectiveness Advisor managing training centres in China.

She was president of the Singapore Training And Development Association, and chaired the National Productivity Board Task Force on the development of trainers in 1989.

She was also an advisor to the Ministry of Manpower National Council for Certification of Trainers in 2002.



JENICA CHUA CHOR PING, 35, HONORARY SECRETARY

The National University of Singapore graduate is a management consultant for the South East Asia Hub of SAP, a global software company.

She previously worked for the McKinsey management consultancy. She spent two years providing support and counselling for women in prison aftercare. She joined Aware in 2007.

In 2007, she wrote to The Straits Times Forum page supporting Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between two mutually consenting adult men.

Last year, she posted a comment on gay social networking website, Trevvy.com, arguing that the church considers homosexuality sinful.



SALLY ANG KOON HIAN, 60, ASSISTANT HONORARY SECRETARY

A lawyer, she started her own firm, Sally Ang Ebenezer, in 2004.

After graduating from the University of Singapore in 1972, she worked in government at the Legal Aid Bureau and as an Assistant Official Assignee & Public Trustee and Deputy Registrar of Trade Marks & Patents before becoming registrar.

In 1998 she joined the private sector as a consultant with Messrs Fong Partners & Associates. Her area of practice covers family law, property, trade marks, bankruptcy, liquidation, contracts, probate and administration and accident claims.

She has acted for women in matrimonial cases assigned by the Legal Aid Bureau.



MAUREEN ONG LEE KEANG, 55, HONORARY TREASURER

She has a First Class honours degree in Accountancy from the University of Singapore and is a Fellow Certified Public Accountant member of both the Institute of Certified Public Accountants of Singapore and CPA Australia.

She has 30 years of experience in finance, tax and treasury management in various industries, having started her career with DBS Bank before moving on to Deloitte & Touche and the SembCorp Group.

Her last appointment was Executive Vice President of SembCorp Group where she was responsible for, among other things, corporate planning, mergers and acquisitions as well as project financing.

She is a volunteer with City Community Services, set up by the Anglican St Andrew's Cathedral, and works with primary school pupils in neighbourhood schools.

NEW GUARD'S RESPONSE

We're ready for the task, but why are some so angry with us?

New president Josie Lau issued this letter to the media yesterday

I REFER to the report, "Unknowns knock out veterans at Aware polls" (The Straits Times, April 10) and various letters and media articles that followed.

We are delighted in the renewed interest in the reinvigorated Aware and its democratically elected Executive Committee.

There are a few important factors that warrant making, which will lend clarity to the nature of the electoral process which sparked such intense attention.

First, outgoing president Constance Singam nominated Claire Nazar as successor. Nazar nominated six out of 11 new exco members with the Old Guard's support.

Ten of 12 positions were openly contested. Old Guard Chew I-jin's position was not contested. The entire meeting lasted 3½ hours as some 20 candidates gave electoral speeches and fielded questions from the floor.

As Mrs Singam noted at the AGM's beginning, Aware's recruitment drive had succeeded through its marketing efforts. From a high of 675 in 1998, ordinary membership plummeted to 253 in 2008. At last count, there are about 400 members, and membership continues to grow at an impressive rate.

The new exco members were eager to start work. However, there were repeated delays in convening the first exco meeting. Mrs Nazar kept re-scheduling the meeting.

The first meeting was held on April 7. On April 8, Mrs Nazar abruptly and unilaterally resigned by e-mail. This left us president-less. The Aware constitution requires seven days' notice to call exco

meetings. We acted swiftly and called the second exco meeting on April 15. Josie Lau was named new president unopposed. A press release was immediately issued.

As president, I am disappointed that before the second exco meeting on April 15, a requisition for an EOGM for the apparent purpose of replacing the elected exco was handed to Aware on April 14. This contained 160 signatures. No more than five signatories were present at the March 28 AGM attended by 99 ordinary members and three associate members. Some 120 of the 160 signatories appear to have been recruited just after the AGM in time to swell support for the requisition.

In the face of intense media and cyber scrutiny, I must ask this question: Why have some people cast aspersions on our good intentions? Why are they so angry with us? We've only just begun.

We seek to improve the quality of life of women in Singapore. We are pro-women, pro-family and pro-Singapore. What is so objectionable about that? Does the old guard harbour an alternative agenda? If so, they should disclose their motives and objectives fully and honestly.

Aware is a secular organisation. Its members come from different races, walks of life and hold different belief systems. Our commitment to advancing the cause of women unites us. As a democratic society, we cherish viewpoint diversity.

I have full confidence in my new exco team. We know many challenges lie ahead but this team is ready for the task.

Josie Lau
President, Aware

COMMITTEE MEMBERS



CATHERINE TAN LING GHIM, 38

A certified financial planner, she registered two companies with her husband, Mr Jeremy Lesslar, in the 1990s.

In 1994, she founded The Ad House which provides art and graphic design services. It closed in 1996.

Two years later she founded Cahoots Marketing Services, an ad agency. That closed in 2001.

A former student of CHIJ Toa Payoh, she served on the executive committee of its alumni association from 2005 to 2009 and helped in fundraising projects.



LOIS NG, 44

A social entrepreneur, she has spent the last seven years running business, Studio You Pte Ltd.

She hires people with different disabilities to work together to produce gifts for the tourist and corporate markets.

She has a degree in Business Administration from the NUS and a professional diploma in creative entrepreneurship.

An ex-journalist with The New Paper, she worked in China and Australia for 5 years, as an advertising manager and volunteer worker respectively. Ms Ng also spent some years working with the Christian organisation Youth With A Mission.



IRENE YEE KHOR QUIN, 38

A certified financial planner, she worked with Life Planning Associates, a financial advisory firm with a Christian focus.

Its tagline reads: "Fee-based Financial Planning founded on Biblical Wisdom".

She holds a Masters degree in Business from an Australian university, and an Economics degree from the United States. Previously married to a lawyer, she is now divorced.

She wrote a letter to My Paper last year, urging the Health Ministry to review Singapore's abortion laws because of the health risks to women.



PEGGY LEONG PEK KAY, 39

An NUS graduate in Psychology and Sociology and trained teacher, she is a lecturer at Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School of Humanities.

She has conducted numerous counselling and helping workshops in both English and Chinese in Singapore and overseas.

OLD AWARE MEMBERS



CARIS LIM, 38, COMMITTEE MEMBER

A freelance social worker, counsellor and trainer, she has an Australian degree in social work and a Singapore diploma in counselling practice.

She has worked with a diverse group of clients from inmates and their families to single parents and elderly women. She has been an Aware member since 2000 and co-ordinates its Direct Services - Helpline and Support Services.

She has been active on various Aware sub-committees and is a trainer of its Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme.



CHEW I-JIN, 41, ASSISTANT HONORARY TREASURER

She has a master's degree from Cambridge University and is a polytechnic lecturer in architecture.

She joined Aware in 1995 and served on the Exco in 1995/96 and was the honorary treasurer in 2008/9.

At the recent AGM, she was nominated by old guard Aware members to be vice president, but faced a challenge by newcomer Charlotte Wong Hock Soon and lost.

Ms Chew, who is single, has served on several Aware committees, and was heavily involved in many of its fund-raising and research initiatives including on singles.

TEXT: YEN FENG ST PHOTOS: MUGLIAN RAJASEGERAN ST GRAPHICS

Bank's public criticism of a senior officer sparks debate

By ROBIN CHAN

DBS Bank was not saying more yesterday about Ms Josie Lau, after it publicly rebuked her for taking on the top post at Aware despite being told not to.

Ms Lau, vice-president in its cards division, reported to work as usual yesterday. She issued her first statement as Aware's new president, but said nothing about the criticisms levelled at her by her employer on Wednesday and Thursday.

DBS had revealed that she disregarded its staff code not once but twice, first by not seeking approval before joining the Aware executive committee, and then by defying her employer's advice against becoming president.

The bank's action has drawn flak, with some taking issue with the fact that Ms Lau needed approval before taking up a voluntary position.

A female human resources executive at a multinational corporation here said: "DBS should be proud that someone from their company wants to take up this position."

But others noted that Ms Lau flouted a rule staff should have known about.

A senior corporate affairs officer at a large Singapore-based company said that most top companies would have codes of conduct to deal with conflict-of-interest issues. "In this case, it seems that she was aware of it and yet chose to breach the bank's code of conduct."

Still, Mr Josh Goh, senior manager for corporate services at search firm The

GMP Group, pointed out: "In most cases, this would have been kept a private issue."

Asked why he thought DBS reacted the way it did, he said it could be because Aware is an influential group.

"It seems there are serious concerns over whether she should take up such a major role. So they had to come out strongly," he said.

Others felt that DBS acted the way it did because it was unhappy at the prospect of being drawn unnecessarily into controversy.

Ms Lau's team had been asked last year to identify a suitable charity to benefit from a DBS credit card fund-raising drive.

The bank chose Focus on the Family, and ran into protests from some customers upset that the charity and its American parent group took a strongly anti-homosexual line.

A banker with extensive consumer banking experience said: "Given that DBS only recently went through a fiasco when it chose the anti-gay Focus on the Family as the Christmas charity for its credit cards, they would understandably have been very worried about Josie taking a leadership role at Aware."

"It's easy to make the link from Josie to the DBS cards division and the Focus on the Family issue."

So while the bank's actions may strike some as excessive, she pointed out: "It wasn't just any officer taking on any appointment."

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3 HECTIC WEEKS

MARCH 28

Aware's annual general meeting draws an unexpectedly large number of people. Many are new members who joined in recent months. The old guard is shocked when the newcomers defeat more seasoned members to take nine out of 12 positions on the executive committee. The new president is Mrs Claire Nazar, elected unopposed after being nominated by outgoing president Constance Singam. Mrs Nazar nominated six newcomers who became exco members.

APRIL 8

Mrs Nazar resigns as president. No reasons are given. She confirms her exit but refuses to answer

further queries from the media.

APRIL 14

The Aware old guard leads 160 members in calling for an extraordinary general meeting, possibly to table a vote of no confidence in the new exco. Longtime members say there are too many unanswered questions about the new women in charge, how they got together to seize power and what they intend to do with Aware.

APRIL 15

The exco meets to pick a new president. Immediate past president Constance Singam attends but is asked to leave at the start. She is invited back later but walks out shortly. Exco member Caris Lim leaves three hours into the meeting, telling reporters she is disillusioned and

disturbed by the proceedings. Ms Josie Lau is made president and makes brief comments to reporters but refuses to answer questions. Her employer, DBS Bank, immediately issues a statement saying it does not support her taking up the presidency and had told her so.

The new Aware issues a statement announcing its new president and pledging to carry on the good work of the association and its founders.

APRIL 16

Two-time Aware president and former Nominated Member of Parliament Braema Mathi is told by e-mail that she is no longer in charge of producing a key report on discrimination against women in Singapore.

DBS Bank issues a second statement revealing that Ms Lau breached its staff code of conduct twice by not informing her bosses that she

intended to stand for elections to the Aware exco, and defying advice not to take up the presidency. The sharply worded statement says DBS does not condone such conduct in a leader and will do an internal review.

APRIL 17

Aware president Josie Lau issues a statement emphasising that her exco members were all elected properly according to the association's rules. She says she does not understand why her team has come in for criticism when they are "pro women, pro-family and pro-Singapore". She questions the motives of the old guard in calling for an EOGM and asks if they harbour another agenda. Ms Lau cannot be reached to answer questions arising from the statement. Other Aware officials say Ms Lau is the only one who can speak about this.