



Igniting the FLAME of Hope

■ By David Yu

“Inside the CEIBS classroom, when he’s ‘wearing’ his ‘professor hat’, Bala Ramasamy is all business, very serious. But you can see his sweet side if...,” MBA 2019 student Ankie Wu pauses a bit to build up the suspense, then finishes with a flourish and wide grin, “if you join us, to add some fuel to the FLAME.”

FLAME, short for Foundations for Leadership and Moral Empowerment, was founded in 2008 by Professor of Economics and Associate Dean at CEIBS, Bala Ramasamy, in Malaysia, where he grew up. The initiative is dedicated to the development of responsible young leaders from within the society’s less fortunate communities. Totally free of charge,

the project has already hosted more than 75 camps, built solid working relationships with more than 10 schools, and touched the lives of more than 3,000 children. FLAME has also helped nurture a sense of social responsibility within the CEIBS community, with many staff, students and alumni supporting the project over the years. It is a good fit

with CEIBS' wider efforts to groom responsible business leaders while itself being a responsible corporate player.

“From giving us useful tips to concrete teaching techniques, Professor Bala – or Uncle Bala as we call him – tirelessly trains us before every camp,” says Ankie who has already volunteered three times. “Before empowering the children in need, he first empowers us.” When she thinks about Uncle Bala, she says, the first word that springs to mind is professionalism. “His entire family believes in the importance of education, and he has a deep understanding of what it takes to educate teenagers,” she explains.

FLAME, and Professor Bala, has also inspired CEIBS alumna Caroline Zhang (GEMBA 2013) who has a long history of social outreach. For Caroline, the very essence of FLAME can be summed up in Professor Bala's famous four rules: be happy, don't be unhappy, think about others, don't think only about yourself. He rattles them off before each camp, and she can still hear him saying, “For those who are more fortunate, like us, it's never an easy thing to stay happy. It's even tougher for the kids FLAME is trying to help – they have seldom been happy since they were born.” Some of Caroline's fondest memories are of Professor Bala, a huge fan of Oreo cookies, using the chocolate treat to bring smiles to FLAME kids' faces. He buys a lot of Oreos! “That's the kind of happiness he brings with him,” she

says. “This small thing that gives pure happiness always makes our camp feel like the warmest corner of the world.”

Caroline finds it refreshing that, unlike other projects she has worked with before, FLAME does not focus on the “financial aspect” of doing good. Instead, it enlists the help of volunteers such as her and Ankie who work together with Professor Bala to figure out how best to deliver value to the kids who turn to the camp for support or solutions. “I used to provide financial support to a number of kids from modest backgrounds in Guizhou. They wrote me a lot of letters, but I never knew how to reply properly,” says Caroline. “Without face-to-face communication, it's difficult to understand their suffering and what kind of help they need – is it financial aid or mental and moral support?”

She thinks the FLAME camps' course design, shaped by Professor Bala's expertise in economics and his knowledge of educational psychology, are perfect for the development of the children engaged. “Classes are always well balanced between fun, knowledge and attention control,” Caroline explains.

Totally non-profit in its operations, FLAME never accepts funding from governments or other entities. It is completely self-funded, with contributions from Professor Bala and FLAME volunteers. No one is paid – a true spirit of volunteerism. In fact,

volunteers pay their own way when camps are held outside Shanghai. The first volunteers were mostly his friends and relatives in Malaysia who understood what drives his need to inspire the less fortunate. “His father, who was a teacher, passed away at an early age. Thanks to their mother, who was very focused on morals and education, Professor Bala and his nine siblings were brought up in a modest yet positive environment and they all went to college,” Caroline explains. “This spirit of excelling despite the odds was passed on to Professor Bala. He wants to inspire those who are suffering from poverty and a lack of education; that became his motivation to ‘ignite FLAME.’”

From an initial spark in Malaysia, FLAME first offered a camp in Dali, China in 2009, and today this spirit of helping the less fortunate continues to burn within the CEIBS community. The torch has been passed to many alumni and students, including Chen Qichun (EMBA 2016), CEO of the Sichuan Orient Hydroelectric Equipment & Engineering Co Ltd. FLAME has given him a chance to give back to his hometown.

“I was born in Fushun County, part of Zigong City. It's a small, remote and under-developed part of Sichuan Province,” he says over the phone, his voice firm and deep, with a strong South-West accent. Sichuan is an important labour-exporting province and, with their parents off searching for opportunities in the more



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developed East, many children there are raised by grandparents. Some are even left alone. This lack of a strong parent figure can have a negative impact on kids’ development, causing behavioural problems. While at a gathering with classmates, Shelly Fang, the class coordinator told Chen Qichun about the FLAME camp Professor Bala was leading. Seeing the value it would bring to his community, he immediately contacted his brother who worked at the local school they had both attended as kids.

In June 2017, right after Children’s Day, “Uncle Bala” and Chen Qichun, accompanied by a group of CEIBS alumni and a few other volunteers, spent a special weekend with children at Fushan Town’s Nine-year Education School. “The children were very timid at the beginning, but when the camp ended they were so reluctant to say goodbye,” says Chen Qichun.

He himself is from humble beginnings, and though he left home many years ago he has never forgotten what he learnt from his family, teachers and friends. “I was told, from when I was very young, that I should grow up to be a nice and caring person, and that I should give back to those who helped me,” he says. He has tried to live up to those expectations. His WeChat tagline, which roughly translates to “one can be simple and ordinary, but one shouldn’t stay mediocre and banal”, could also be applied to his attitude towards charitable causes and the social responsibility of business leaders. “I think ‘giving back’ does not necessarily mean doing something huge. Now that I am a bit more fortunate than some members of the community, it’s only natural that I should take more responsibility to give back to the place where I grew up, and to the society at large. FLAME has given

me the chance to do this.”

What he finds most valuable in what Professor Bala and so many other members of the CEIBS community have been doing, he said, is the flame of hope they ignite within less fortunate children who are simply in need of love and care. Ankie and Caroline agree. Their ultimate goal is to tell children, who have been ignored for so long, “YOU are so very, very important.”

“The heart and soul of the FLAME project are the volunteers,” says Professor Bala. “It is truly humbling to see students, alumni and staff of CEIBS allocating time and money to bring joy and laughter to the kids of the FLAME camps. While on Friday they are CEOs and senior managers, on Saturday, at the camp, they put on their FLAME T-shirts, and become a brother or a sister to young teenagers,” he adds.

Inside the FLAME Camp

■ By Laurie Underwood (MBA 2003)

The sound of teenagers cheering each other, carries across the lawn, cutting the tropical Sunday afternoon heat. It is the final hours of a camp which began on Friday afternoon when more than sixty 14-year olds gathered at the campus of FLAME Camp, in Tambun, Perak, Malaysia to begin a weekend focused on the Spirit of Service. Two days ago, the newly arriving teens bore the awkward quietness typical of junior high students meeting for the first time. Today however, the flushed faces and hoarse shouts show that all shyness is gone. In its place, team spirit is the predominant emotion as ten groups struggle with the task at hand – the completion of a home-made ‘boat’ which will not only stay afloat but move faster than other teams’ vessels in the final challenge of this camp. As the young boat designers rush to the racing trough, each carrying a unique floating contraption created from popsicle sticks, cleaned empty soda cans, rubber bands, and sheets of plastic, the shouts of their team mates ring out in a mix of English, Mandarin and Tamil: “Go Team Diamond!” “Jia you!” “Vetri!”

At the centre of this scene of organised chaos, directing the group of 20 adult volunteers, stands Professor Bala Ramasamy, best known at CEIBS as one of the most renowned foreign economists in China. Dressed in an orange FLAME camp T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, he watches the scene

with satisfaction. Although he has run literally hundreds of similar camps over the past 30 years, this one was a bit different – and a bit risky. This one, held in May 2016, was the first FLAME camp to combine teenagers from a Chinese middle school with those from an Indian middle school – a delicate proposition in Malaysia, where ethnic tensions can become volatile. Since FLAME camps cater to teenagers, the combination could fairly easily have gone sour. Just one racial slur from one of the larger boys, for example, could have exploded into an argument or physical fight.

But by Sunday afternoon, a few hours from the finish, it is clear that the experiment has worked. Differences in language, skin tone and gender are forgotten as the teams collaborate to create the best possible boat before the deadline....

Flash-forward to a chilly Saturday morning in early March, 2018, in China's Henan Province. This weekend, FLAME Camp is attempting its most ambitious activity in China – Professor Ramasamy is leading a group of 25 volunteers to run two camps simultaneously at a pair of schools located 25 minutes apart in the dusty second-tier city of Zhengzhou.

Addressing the 60 slightly nervous students gathered at the first school, speaking via a CEIBS alumni who

translates his words into Mandarin, Professor Ramasamy (better known at FLAME as Uncle Bala or Bala Shu-shu) uses his introductory address to prepare the teens for the coming two days of leadership skills activities. "Do you know why all these volunteers have come all the way from Shanghai to your school this weekend to arrange FLAME camp for you?" he asks, gesturing toward the FLAME volunteers waiting to begin the camp. "Because each of you is special. Each of you is valuable. Each of you is a shining star, and a gem. We believe in you."

At this school, although the students know each other well, the message is new and, for some, quite strange. It will be a challenge for the volunteers to convince some of these students to buy into the empowering messages of the activities. The participants in this weekend's double camp include not only a mix of ethnic Muslim minority and Han Chinese, but also students from two-parent families as well as a number of orphans, some with difficult histories and troubling pasts. With these challenges in mind, the volunteers cheerfully begin the first ice-breaker – the "blanket game" pairing two groups of students who may not know each other on opposite sides of a small blanket. As the game begins, amid the excited shouts of the students, Bala Shu-Shu rushes off to begin FLAME camp in the second school.