

executive lifestyle

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PHOTOS OF WENDY CHOONG, CELIA LIM, SEET SOON CHUEN, ARTHUR LEE

Jump to it: Founder of The Pilates Place, Jackie Lim (left) says her current income is in fact higher than at her previous job teaching pilates to her customers; Director of four private preschools Wendy Choong (on piano) and SLS instructor Alice Siau see value in pursuing their singing passion with a Speech Level Singing certification



Ex-PMEB hobbyists are taking their driving passions to the next level with skills certifications, **TAN TECK HENG**

PUMP UP THE passion



PHOTO-MONTAGE: JENNIFER CHUA

'I would love to travel around the globe and work in restaurants to experience the different cuisines and flavours, and eventually become a culinary teacher after I have gained sufficient experience in the industry'

— Ex-Airhub Strategy Officer with the Changi Airport Group, Celia Lim (right, inset) who is in the midst of completing her degree with the Culinary Institute of America

DIRECTOR of four private preschools Wendy Choong manages her business in the day, and spends time with her two daughters after work. But on top of work and family duties, Ms Choong also coaches singing on weeknights and conducts her church choir on Sundays.

She's not aiming to win a Superwoman of the year award. She's just one of a growing number of professionals who work but at the same time are passionate about their hobbies – in her case, singing. And not just content with singing in the bathroom, she wants to take her talent as far as it can go while still carving out a career in the corporate world.

That's why Ms Choong is a licensed instructor under the Speech Level Singing (SLS) method, an institution that counts the likes of Ray Charles and Michael Jackson among their more famous alumni. With other institutions offering certification for everything from inline skating to culinary skills opening in Singapore recently, hobbyists have more options when they want to turn their passions into something more official.

"I decided to go 'pro' when I felt that I needed to improve further to be more effective as a choir director," says Ms Choong, explaining that getting certified bolsters her confidence when it comes to coaching; she's also a qualified Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music piano teacher. "It's only responsible to ensure the lessons I give will help these singers improve instead of destroying their voices," she says.

From two instructors in Singapore in 2006, SLS has since certified nine and four more are in the pipeline.

The same upward trend is seen in the inline-skating certification programme ICP, with a staggering 123 listed local instructors who are largely part-timers. Additionally, Singapore also boasts four out of 14 highest certified ICP instructor-examiners in the world.

"We have the largest concentration of ICP instructors in ratio to population size," observes ICP Asia Pacific director Felix Yeo and founder of inline skating school Skateline, who also holds a full time position as director of administration at Wesley Methodist Church.

Stott Pilates similarly reports healthy enrolment numbers, with "a huge spike in the past two years as we built up momentum", says general manager of Options Studio, Joe Halstead. Thirty per cent of the instructors at its licensed training centre are in fact part-timers who are PMEBS.

It's the case as well with Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), a popular scuba diving programme which has 18 affiliated dive centres in Singapore.

"There is a major difference if you were to compare the data from five years ago," says manager Ephraim Ang of PADI dive centre Gill Divers. He notes that 20 to 30 instructors at Gill Divers are professionals who coach or take part in diving trips on weekends.

Cooking up a storm too is the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) – the American

version of Le Cordon Bleu which has turned out celebrity graduates like Anthony Bourdain – which set up shop at the Singapore Institute of Technology in 2010. Working adults currently comprise 18 per cent of its current students.

A major reason for professionals seeking sports certifications is safety. Many like ICP instructor Seet Soon Chuen are drawn to formal programmes because of their proven track record. ICP for instance has been awarded National Coaching Accreditation Programme Level 1 by the Singapore Sports Council in recognition of their efforts at safety and consistency in coaching.

"To many parents at that time, inline skating was a dangerous sport as there was no emphasis on safety awareness and wearing protective gear," says Mr Seet, a full-time marketing manager who picked up the sport so he could teach his then five-year-old son himself. "There were many who were interested in this new sport but afraid to pick it up as there were not many qualified instructors," he says.

Gill Diver's Mr Ang agrees: "With proof of a certification card, it means that the diver is well aware of the dangers in diving and the safety measures that have to be taken." But branding and reputation aside, studying under these established methods is an entirely different thing from taking the next step and becoming a full-fledged instructor. "It takes a lot of time, energy and a full load of passion to complete and maintain the certification process," says SLS instructor and ex-SEA education advisory group head Alice Siau. (She's recently stepped down from her advisory role to make time for her kids.)

A case in point herself, Ms Siau has to handle being a single mother of two and

her day job as a key account manager with a travel management company. She currently teaches singing on two weeknights and on the weekends. Having a domestic helper is a boon as "without her, it would have been hard for me to juggle everything", she says.

Getting certified doesn't come cheap either: SLS instructors spend up to S\$10,000 a year for licensing fees and trips to the United States for conventions. And a fully certified Stott Pilates instructor for instance spends up to \$12,000 over a period of two years. Factor in time spent on practising and auditing by instructor examiners, and you get a sense of just how much dedication is required to pursue a sideline career in your hobby of choice.

Since mixing work and play doesn't sound all that great an idea, what motivates these busy working professionals to make time for their second life?

For media and hospitality professional Sylvie Ackermann, Pilates is her passion which "allows me to centre myself and to

keep in shape", says the mother of three who decided to go pro four years ago. "It seemed to be a good source of income on the side then, but now that I work, it provides a balance in my life," says the Stott Pilates instructor.

And ICP's Mr Seet has moved on from teaching his son to students of all ages because "it is my passion and a hobby to keep myself fit and active, both physically and mentally," he says. "I will be skating and teaching as long as I am still fit and able."

Coaching full-time however doesn't seem likely for these multitasking individuals because it doesn't provide a stable source of income. "I will consider switching to full-time only after my children are out of the house," says Stott Pilates's Ms Ackermann. "The risk and stress of a freelance job are too much when you have three children."

It's the same for SLS's Ms Siau, who discounts singing or teaching it professionally. "Coming from a corporate background with a stable income, I will only consider 'plunging' into singing full-time if I have loads of savings to back me up," she says. "Honestly speaking, the music industry in Singapore is highly competitive; reality is, it's tough to make ends meet by singing professionally alone."

Besides, "I find more fulfilment in teaching rather than in singing profession-

Safe ride: For skating instructor, Seet Soon Chuen (above, in orange shirt), a major reason for professionals seeking sports certifications is safety

ally," she continues. "It's my greater passion but I just want to keep it that way. I function better as an instructor this way," she says, adding that her takings often don't make up for the cost of maintaining her SLS certification.

But there are those who have made the switch like founder of The Pilates Place, Jackie Lim. An ex-supply chain specialist with an MNC, Ms Lim reveals that her current income is in fact higher than at her previous job, but that it comes with longer working hours – she works six days a week from early morning till 10pm at night.

"I have not taken a real vacation for a long time," she says. "Having said that, the career switch is worth everything. Pilates is still my passion, whether to do or teach, and watching my clients improve gives me more satisfaction and drive."

Another who has taken the road less travelled is ex-Airhub Strategy Officer with the Changi Airport Group, Celia Lim. Now in the midst of completing her degree with CIA, Celia made the choice because she's "always loved eating and exploring flavours", she says. "I would love to travel around the globe and work in restaurants to experience the different cuisines and flavours, and eventually become a culinary teacher after I have gained sufficient experience in the industry."

And these inspiring pioneers are creating a ripple-like effect within the ranks of jaded working professionals looking for a breath of fresh air. "My clients are mostly PMEBS and there seems to be a trend among them to switch to careers that incorporate their recreational activity," observes Ms Lim of The Pilates Place. "Work stress seems to be the common reason; some have been at the same job for too long and they need to break away." She also currently employs three part-time instructors from the dental health, procurement and sales sectors.

For those agonising over making the switch, Ms Lim has this to say: "You only live once, so go with your heart; if you haven't tried, you will never know." It seems to be a philosophy which has served her well.

Going pro part-time: At Gill Divers (left) there are now 20 to 30 instructors who are professionals who coach or take part in diving trips on weekends. This is a marked difference from five years ago