

# THE MAKERS CLUB: STARTING UP!

## INTERVIEWS WITH A DESIGNER

Hear from a designer and how she imagines design solutions to real-life problems.



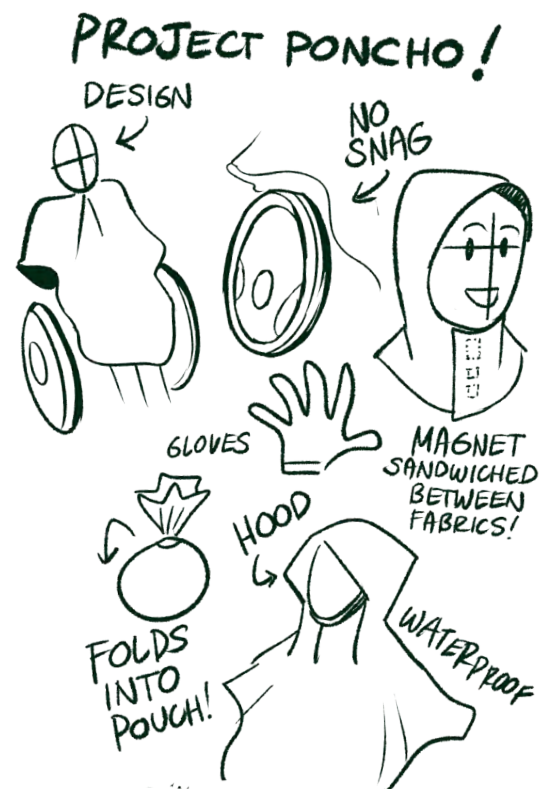
### "ADAPTIVE WEAR" IS NOT A CONCEPT THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT FOR US?

Different kinds of clothing categories exist for different uses, climates and styles, such as activewear for exercise and outerwear for colder temperatures. Adaptive wear exists to meet the needs of people with disabilities, empowering a greater variety of choices.

### WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN THIS AREA OF CLOTHING DESIGN?

I took a class where my classmate and I were teamed up with a person with a disability to design a coat she could put on without using her hands. I had never experienced a group project like that before. Everyone on the team wanted the same goal: to be able to make dressing easier for our friend. It made me really happy and fulfilled to see the things we made actually play a key role in her life. After that, I couldn't stop experimenting with different ways of putting clothes on. Being able to wear what we want to wear can bring us happiness and confidence. Why shouldn't everyone get that choice?

### YOU HELPED US DESIGN THE PONCHO ITEM FOR THE CHARACTER YONG QIANG. WALK US THROUGH YOUR DESIGN PROCESS.



There are so many raincoats out there. A design process can start by asking why existing solutions aren't good enough. It helps to determine who we are designing for, where and when they need to wear it.

For the character Yong Qiang, the design process stemmed from conversations with past collaborators and classmates who've also designed adaptive rain jackets. Existing raincoats don't factor in seated users. This results in water pooling on their laps and under the seat. Sometimes the detachable zippers on the front can be hard to fasten, so I took the opportunity to ideate a zipper-free solution that would be quick and easy to wear. Tropical downpours can be sudden, so it is important for Yong Qiang to be able to dress with speed.

We got to experiment with different solutions in the fictional world of *The Makers Club* without necessarily having to wrap ourselves up in the technicalities. For example, we didn't specify what type of waterproof fabric Aqi uses. Most water-resistant fabrics aren't 100% waterproof and that's to ensure that it's still breathable. A fully waterproof material like vinyl, isn't likely to be porous, but that can cause discomfort when we perspire. There are some amazing innovations by Polartec and Gore, companies that explore the science behind these materials that combat these challenges.



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### TELL US ABOUT AN ADAPTIVE WEAR PROJECT THAT YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED IN.

I collaborated with a young professional in New York City who experienced paralysis in her arms. We built and hid inflatable structures inside pants and skirts for a hands-free dressing experience. When inflated, they would rise onto her body. It was so much fun to experience dressing in an unexpected way. Automation may seem bizarre in the world of fashion, however, it is becoming increasingly relevant in other fields and not just for people with disabilities. Voice-controlled assistants and self-driving cars are slowly being integrated into the world, why shouldn't clothes do more for us and for our bodies?

### HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR YOU TO PROTOTYPE AN ADAPTIVE WEAR ITEM? WHAT PART OF THE PROCESS IS YOUR FAVOURITE AND WHAT PART DO YOU FIND MOST CHALLENGING?

Each prototype takes me about 3-5 days, this includes drafting the pattern, cutting the fabric and sewing. The first two prototypes are cut in a substitute fabric. My favourite part is right after I fit the first prototype on the body and everything becomes much clearer. My mistakes become obvious and I gain more certainty as I chip away at the design. At this stage, it's okay to make mistakes, experiment and to try new things. I get optimistic. The possibility of fixing these mistakes and the deluded assumption that my sewing will not err becomes highly motivating. In my mind, I can already see and touch the finished piece. Then, reality hits me at 4 am when I'm unpicking my mistakes as I play TV sitcom in the background. Then, I take a step back and promise myself that I'll do better next time. Self-disappointment is challenging.

### WHAT MAKES RETAIL CLOTHING DIFFICULT FOR SOMEONE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

Mass market fashion focuses on the majority and their needs. It fails to acknowledge that as we grow up, we gain and lose abilities. The things that once worked well for us, don't change with us. For example, if you grow taller, you may need longer pants; if you fall and hurt your arm, it'll be difficult to put on a T-shirt using only one arm. Or how we need additional attire for specialised activities, whether it is scuba fins to swim faster underwater, space suits for astronauts, or a simple raincoat to keep dry and go out during heavy rain.

### YOU ACTUALLY STARTED A CLOTHING DESIGN COMPANY. CAN YOU TELL US MORE AND WHAT YOUR AIMS ARE?

Werable is a design studio and our mission is to inspire confidence through easy-to-wear apparel. We believe in pushing the capabilities of clothing to be healthier for our bodies. I started Werable with the vision of a future where we age with style and comfort. We innovate around dressing challenges that arise from reduced dexterity and stiff limbs. Our research stems from co-designing with users who value self-care.

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A MAKER WHO WANTS TO DESIGN CLOTHES SPECIFICALLY FOR SOMEONE'S NEEDS?

Have fun, be a listener and give your ideas a chance before you rule them out! It's easy to let self-doubt and negativity stop you before you even embark on your journey. Challenge habits. Adaptive wear stems from a place of compassion, care and functionality – but that doesn't mean it can't be stylish.



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Read about how an entrepreneur chooses what business she wants to be in.



**RILLA  
MELATI  
BAHRI**

### TELL US ABOUT WHAT YOU DO!

I'm the Director of Mini Monsters Ltd. I write books and create educational bilingual Malay-English content for children. I also plan strategies, manage a team of full-time and part-time staff, as well as set the goals for the company!

### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO SET UP YOUR OWN COMPANY? TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY!

Being an entrepreneur is a culmination of all that I've gathered from growing up in the TV studio as a child star. I watched my father craft scripts for children's TV shows, and write and publish storybooks and assessment books for Malay children, all alongside working full-time as a school teacher! He was such an inspiration and an integral part of my childhood. He also exposed me to the process of bookmaking by bringing me to his meetings with book publishers and editors.

Still, it wasn't until the year 2000 that I set up a company with a friend called Stagehandz. The company offered educational roadshows and drama workshops to schools in Singapore. I was home-based, newly married, and functioning from the bedroom of my house for the first two years. Later on, in 2003, we set up an enrichment centre called ACTphabets at the Esplanade. Stagehandz, on the other hand, continued to service schools.



During this time, I saw a gap. Although we were offering English language workshops, the need to provide good quality Malay programmes to children who were struggling with their mother tongue was something that I could not pretend not to see. Unlike Mandarin, where resources were aplenty, there were no available ready-made educational materials in Malay that were appealing and could be found in mainstream bookstores. Parents and teachers were dependent on Malay children books and resources from Malaysia, which were contextually distant for our local children, who learned Malay as a second language.

Being a young mother myself, I was also strapped with resources to use with my own son. I borrowed books from the library, but my son did not enjoy them, and I suddenly found myself turning into an instant storyteller, reciting a new Malay bedtime story with different original plots created every night! This nightly session became some sort of an emotional therapy for me. It was during this time that I decided to take up the challenge of creating my own Malay content for the bilingually unique Singaporean child, and offered these classes at ACTphabets as well as in primary schools under Stagehandz.

But Stagehandz-ACTphabets was struggling as a business and it closed a year after my own divorce was finalised. Still, I would say, this was the turning point in which I truly became an entrepreneur. I woke up to the reality that I was offering a service and provided a product that did not exactly meet the needs I intended them to. Yes, I saw a gap. Yes, I saw a problem. Yes, I had the solution. But I missed a crucial point – the community whom I thought needed it did not urgently need it yet. So I reflected and paused.

It was a very painful time for me. Personally, I was nursing my heart from the divorce, while career-wise I was at a loss on what to do next. I was still able to survive financially through acting, hosting, and writing work with the local Malay TV station, but going full-time into entertainment or media was never an option for me. I liked the work, but never enjoyed the glitz and glam that came with being a public figure.

Still, something in me did not want to give up on the business just yet. Although I was struggling as a young divorcee with a child in tow, and a business that did not take off, I wanted to give myself one last push because I believed very strongly at the time that someone had to do this. The Malay community needed good educational resources, Singapore couldn't continue to have commercial mainstream bookstores that carried hundreds of titles without a single shelf dedicated to Malay books, and local authors who wanted to write for children deserved a chance to have their works published and read.



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So in 2008, armed with two manuscripts of a children's book and a business model that needed reworking and fine-tuning, I teamed up with a long time producer friend Najip Ali and started Mini Monsters. We seeded the company from Najip's production house DuaM Pte Ltd and during its baby years, Mini Monsters was the educational arm of DuaM's TV production business, amalgamating its founder's strengths and expertise — entertainment and education, hence the motto "Berhibur dan Belajar". In 2013, Mini Monsters parted ways from DuaM and became Mini Monsters Limited, and that's where we are today!

### WHAT DOES BEING AN ENTREPRENEUR MEAN TO YOU?

Personally, being an entrepreneur means having strong vision, and believing in the need to make a change and solve a problem by providing a solution that can better the lives of the community. The most fulfilling part of it is the freedom to craft my own life the way I envision it to be and the ability to leave behind a legacy.

### WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT BEING YOUR OWN BOSS?

I can set my own corporate culture! From the first day Mini Monsters was established, we have supported one organisation or country yearly to do the "qurban" — the act of sacrificing a lamb or cow and distributing the meat to the less fortunate during Hari Raya Haji or Idul Adha. Sometimes, we travel out of Singapore and go to neighbouring countries to do this, and each year presents a different experience!

### WHO ARE SOME ENTREPRENEURS YOU LOOK UP TO?

Claire Chiang, co-founder of Banyan Tree Resorts, and Nadim Makarim, founder of Gojek.

### HOW CAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP HELP IN THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE?

It helps to enhance a community's sense of place and ownership, while attaching culture and heritage with an economic value. For me, Mini Monsters has indirectly helped to preserve a slice of Singapore's unique literary and children's pop culture — both an intangible heritage.



### HOW IMPORTANT IS CREATIVITY IN BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR?

My business is in selling creative content, so if I remove creativity from that equation then there's really nothing for me to sell! But on a practical level, creativity is also important in managing people, because you need to find creative solutions to deal with the people that you work with on a daily basis. We all know how the work environment affects productivity — this sensitive balancing act of handling different human personalities and expectations requires a lot of creative maneuvering!

### HOW HAS THE WORK YOU DO AT MINI MONSTERS IMPACTED OTHERS?

Mini Monsters have contributed to the Singapore literary scene, especially towards writers who choose to write in their vernacular language. We have helped place Siri Aksi Adil as the first local Malay children's storybook to ever be put on the window display of MPH, Singapore's oldest mainstream bookstore.

We designed a reading system and taught hundreds of children how to read Malay through it, as well as pioneered Malay Speech & Drama programmes in schools all over Singapore. We also developed our own materials to teach Malay to non-Malay children in a creative, fun and conducive bilingual environment at Mini Uni.



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We have created a lot of content for TV both for traditional media as well as digital platform. So far we have produced a show for preschoolers to air on Mediacorp Suria, our own bilingual children's online channel called "MonstarsTV" and rolling out digital animation too. We revived and remastered more than 40 children's songs from the sixties to the eighties for use in TV programmes and language classes. All these have been successful in filling up the gap for teachers, children, and parents wanting quality Malay educational programmes and resources. It has given jobs to many book illustrators, designers, actors, stage and TV directors, and other individuals in the private creative industry.

We provided jobs to hundreds of freelance programme facilitators, helping the National Arts Council maintain a healthy ecosystem within the arts industry. On top of that, we collaborated with many tertiary institutions to allow for students to be taken in as interns and obtain on-the-job working experience with the company.

But most importantly, despite its very small size, Mini Monsters has adapted and survived the initial impact of Covid-19, and has stayed relevant in this new economy!

### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO AN ASPIRING ENTREPRENEUR?

Start by examining your goal and your immediate support system. A goal can only become a reality if you put action to it, otherwise it is a dream! So ask yourself — ten times at least! — if your goal is realistic and if you have the means to get to it.

Becoming an entrepreneur means you need to take a huge leap of faith but that does not mean that it is a free-fall. What are your safety nets? It took me a lot of courage to choose the road less travelled, but what gave me the confidence was knowing that I had a good education and that I have the ability to pick up any new skills.

You must have the courage to become an entrepreneur, but when things don't go according to plan, you must also have the courage to eat humble pie and work for someone else.

### HOW DO YOU OVERCOME FAILURE OR OTHER HURDLES ON YOUR ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY?

By accepting failures and recognising my flaws, and then painfully working to improve on it. I am not perfect, and will never be, but I do not like to go into a state of self-pity and use "perfect imperfection" as an excuse. I try my best to strive for perfection. My life's principle is pretty simple and direct: If I fail, I try again, and avoid making the same mistakes. Whether entrepreneur or not, we all want to make decisions that can allow us to sleep better at night and make peace with ourselves at the end of each day.

