play a visit to Idsowe, a small village along the Tana River delta in Kenya, and you will find Garsen High School, a public school offering quality, affordable education to more than 800 students. The school represents the hard work and commitment of Malaysian-born Mr Gabriel Teo Kian Chong, who has spent 23 years striving to improve education in Tana River county. He speaks the local language—Kiswahili—like a native, and his interactions with Kenyans betray a simple truth: this man is no outsider, but a respected member of the community.

Mr Teo admits that this was not life according to plan. Like any fresh graduate out of university, his original aspirations were to land a stable job and live a comfortable life. He had been an excellent student (an ASEAN scholar, no less), and upon graduating from NTU with a degree in accountancy in 1988, secured a position at accounting firm Arthur Andersen almost immediately. Before he started work, Mr Teo went on a graduation trip.

“The day after my final paper, I was on the plane,” Mr Teo told NTULink. “I spent a month in Europe, then nine months in Kenya.” Little did he know that this journey would go on to shape his future into something very different from what he had envisioned.

AN ITCH THAT NEEDED TO BE SCRATCHED

“That first stay in Kenya was off the beaten track. I stayed with a group that was working in a very remote area with the local community,” Mr Teo said, recalling that it was quite a shock to someone like him who was used to modern creature comforts. Even clean water and basic healthcare were hard to come by for the villagers. “A lot of questions started coming up in my mind. I realised there were things that I didn’t know, and maybe things that needed to be answered or explored.”

He returned to Singapore in January 1989 and worked for Arthur Andersen for three years, then spent another two years with Sedco Forex, serving out a five-year bond.

“I gave myself five years to determine whether that desire [to volunteer with the Kenyan community] was just a passing feeling or something more real,” he said. But the calling of community service never left him. In 1995, he resigned and left for Kenya once more.

GIVING HOPE THROUGH EDUCATION

Having benefited from a good education himself, Mr Teo was convinced that nurturing the next generation of thinkers and leaders would make the biggest difference to the community in Idsowe.

“I think education is probably the most sustainable and cost-effective method to help people to help themselves, because it can bring about a permanent change,” he said. So when the headmaster of a school in a village next to Idsowe expressed a desire to start a public school that the families of Tana River county could afford, Mr Teo committed himself wholeheartedly to that mission. That eventually led to the founding of Garsen High School in 2004 and the Tana River Life Foundation (TRLF) in 2005.

But providing academic education was not Mr Teo’s only focus. He felt that education should be holistic, encompassing life skills and values.

“It’s about teaching people self-discovery—to recognise their strengths, their weaknesses and their potential. This is all part of education.”

It’s about teaching people self-discovery—to recognise their strengths, their weaknesses and their potential. This is all part of education. Mr Teo’s strategy has borne fruit. One beneficiary, Mr Oscar Raha, who studied business IT in Malaysia on a scholarship, returned to Idsowe to set up the TRLF IT lab at the Foundation’s Emmaus Community Centre. Mr Raha is also the county’s information and communications technology officer, and is involved in computerising all the government ministries in Tana River county.

“I think this is a very good success story because it shows we have nurtured someone who has not forgotten his community,” said Mr Teo.

Today, TRLF is run by Mr Teo together with 25 full-time staff and 20 volunteers, supporting hundreds of students across the delta. The Foundation has also built the Emmaus Community Centre and a school called the Delta Mustard Seed Academy. Furthermore, TRLF is providing solar reading lamps to primary school children to light up their homes in rural villages off the national grid.

Asked if there was anything that people can do to support TRLF’s efforts, Mr Teo recommends what he did 23 years ago—visit it and see for themselves.

“If you want to do something that involves human lives, I think the first step is to try and be part of the community, to absorb the reality on the ground and to understand the situation better,” he said. “Once you understand what we are doing and why we are doing it, the question of ‘how can I contribute’ will answer itself.”