

Make It Glow - Florence Lam (1982)

The Maryknoll spirit keeps its lamp lit from generation to generation.

Working at Arup, a leading global consultant firm, Florence Lam engineers lighting designs to brighten lives and shape a better world.

In May 2010, Florence flew from London to Las Vegas to represent ARUP to receive 3 awards from the International Association of Lighting Designers. Her success as one of very few prominent Chinese female engineers in the UK prompted a London-based production house to film a documentary on her – including her upbringing at Maryknoll. For this reason, Florence returned to her alma mater after 28 years, since leaving in 1982 for F. 4 studies in London.

Florence stepped into the school once again on a hot August day. “Everything looks very much the same but a lot smaller.” The school buildings, the red brick walls, the wooden benches, the covered playground, the airy classrooms — all brought back sweet memories of those happy salad days.

Since leaving MCS, Florence lived and studied alone in London. The University of Cambridge gave her a conditional offer when she was in F. 6, taking into account of her excellent grades at school and her A grade score in GCE A level mathematics. She got four more A’s in Form 7 and was admitted to the University’s Department of Electrical Engineering. In the 1980’s, few females were admitted to this department and even fewer pursued engineering as a career. There were two other girls in the department together with Florence at that time but they ultimately did not go into engineering.

Florence credits her academic achievements to the strong foundation in English laid by Maryknoll. “I had no problems coping with my studies when get started in London, I read and write well. I wasn’t as good with spoken English but I got over the problem soon by reaching out to speak with people.”

After graduation in 1989, Florence had considered returning to Hong Kong. Two reasons made her stay. The first, to register as a chartered engineer with the Engineering Council, four years of related work experience is required. ARUP, a world renowned engineering consultant firm, offered Florence an apprenticeship position with systematic training to fulfill the Engineering Council requirements.

Another reason, perhaps the most dominant one, was her getting married in 1993 and giving birth to her first son two years later. “I do occasionally think of returning to Hong Kong, but I stayed as I think it is easier to maintain a good work-life balance in London.” Although Florence has two kids and worked part-time, an uncommon practice at ARUP, she continued to advance in her career.

“ARUP truly values talent. If you prove your abilities, you will be given opportunities, regardless of your gender and nationality.” Finding her interest in lighting design engineering, she enrolled in a master’s

degree in lighting architecture at the University College London and graduated in 1991.

In 2001, Florence along with four colleagues enthusiastic about lighting design, established the Arup Lighting Division. Since then, the division had set up branch offices in the US, Netherlands, Australia, Germany, Russia and Asian countries including Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong. Florence is currently the Global Leader of the division, leading colleagues from many disciplines to bring creativity to ARUP's lighting projects.

To Florence, gender has never been an issue at work and neither is working with people with diverse backgrounds. *MCS has taught her trust and integrity and appreciation for co-operative teamwork.* "I have colleagues specialising in architecture, interior design, stage design.... Arup provides them with a platform to share knowledge and vision. My role is that of an orchestra conductor, directing and inspiring people to develop their potential to the fullest."

Among the many lighting design projects that Florence was involved with, the Hong Kong Stonecutters Bridge is one closest to her heart. "The 1.6 km long bridge straddling over the New Territories and Route 8 along the Rambler Channel stands out magnificently in daylight and more so when lit up at night, a great landmark telling a colourful Hong Kong story. The project is especially meaningful to me as I can share the work with my parents in person."

Despite her demanding career, Florence's priority is always that of a mother. "I choose to work part-time 30 hours a week so I can fetch my boys from school, watch over their homework and spend quality time with them."

All it takes is good time management. "I work from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. when the boys are at school and join overseas conference calls after they go to bed. I attend international conferences selectively when I can spare the time."

As the engineering industry begins to recognise lighting design as the "fourth dimension of architecture", Florence sees the opportunity to contribute more to building a better world with her expertise. "When my younger son goes to Form 1 next year, I may consider returning to work full-time."

By being intellectually competent, compassionate in serving others, continuing self-development and contributing to society, Florence has indeed light up the world and kept the MCE flame glowing.