

What's it like to be a strong woman who represents her country abroad? Thirteen girls who won our Ambassador for a Day contest got a once-in-a-lifetime chance to find out.

# Ambassador for a Day

BY MELINDA MURPHY

In our March issue, as a salute to International Women's Day, we launched a contest for girls ages 10 to 18 to spend a day with one of Singapore's female ambassadors. Much to our delight, we were buried with applications from girls of all ages and nationalities. Narrowing it down to thirteen was incredibly hard as they were all excellent applicants.

And what days they had! Each winner's experience was unique, with all the ambassadors and their staff really rolling out the red carpet for their "minis". The girls learned about diplomacy, attended events and met interesting people – one even met the President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob! The Canadian High Commissioner also planned a luncheon for all who could attend. Some girls described their day as a life-changing experience.

We're incredibly proud to have been a part of this initiative, and in this issue we present Part One of the girls' experiences. Be sure to read our July issue for more!



## Hui Yue Xi (Joyce), 18, Singaporean

School: St. Andrew's Junior College  
Ambassador: Margriet Vonno, Netherlands

Why did you want to be Ambassador for a Day? To find out more about the career track of becoming a diplomat and the ambassador of my country as I'm considering taking Political Science at university.



How did you and the ambassador spend your time together?

Firstly, I met Ms Vonno at the Dutch Embassy; she's a very pleasant and amiable woman. Her driver then took us to our first event of the day, Tulip Mania at Gardens by the Bay. When we arrived, we were treated as VIPs, and cameras started flashing in front of us – it was an eye-opening experience for me. We were given a tour of the Flower Dome and welcomed by the director of Gardens by the Bay; I even received a special gift from Royal Dutch Airlines.

After lunch with the other ambassadors and girls from the Ambassador for a Day programme, we went to an event where technological startup companies shared details about their innovations and new technologies; I was greatly awed by the presentations.

After a stop at Ms Vonno's residence, where she gave me a thorough tour of her home and showed me many important artefacts, we headed to a final event at the Botanic Gardens, for a presentation by the Argentinian ambassador regarding flowers and fauna from Argentina that are displayed in the Gardens.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise?

I thought I would probably attend one or two important events, but I ended up at events throughout the day, so it was much more meaningful than expected. I was surprised to get a customised lanyard with my name on it at one of the events; I never expected the organisers to be so thoughtful amidst their busy schedules.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

The insight I've gained into the career of an ambassador and working in the foreign service has enhanced my interest in Political Science, and I'd like to continue pursuing this track in the future.

## Sofia Genato, 13, Filipino

School: SOTA  
Ambassador: Magdalena Bogdziewicz, Poland

Why did you want this opportunity?

Because a profession as a diplomat has always interested me. Even at a very young age, I wanted to work for the UN; this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was a taste of what it would be like.

How did you spend your time together?

We spent our time talking about current world issues, as well as Poland's connections with Singapore. I was also very fortunate to join in a luncheon with the other female ambassadors and I got to talk to them, too.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise of the day?

I expected it to be a very fun, enriching and special learning experience and it really was.

The biggest surprise was the luncheon. The experience was amazing – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Who gets to say, "I've eaten a meal with people I would like to grow up to be like"? And, to top it off, the food was very delicious.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

Before this experience, all I knew was that I wanted to work for the UN. Spending a day at the Polish Embassy showed me the different responsibilities of a diplomat and the team she relies on. As such, I now have a better picture of my role or entry point to this world, working in the communications department. She also encouraged me that, with hard work, I would be able to achieve whatever I want to, and that I should take all these experiences and learning opportunities to make a positive impact on our world.



**Eliana Patel, 11, Indian-American**

School attending: UWCSEA (East Campus)  
Ambassador: Stephanie Syptak-Ramnath, United States

Why did you want this opportunity?

I wanted to experience what a diplomat does on a day-to-day basis, and learn the inner workings of an embassy. I'm always looking to meet inspirational women in leadership positions.



How did you spend your time together?

We started our morning at the US Embassy where I not only met 12 inspiring colleagues of Ms Stephanie, but also received a behind-the-scenes tour of the US Embassy. I was fascinated to learn about the protocol for destroying classified information in case of emergency or attack. We then went to the Mastercard Innovation Center where I learned about stunning new technology that uses artificial intelligence to verify your data when purchasing through Mastercard. It gave me an insight into how the Ambassador works with American companies and connects them with the Department of Commerce. Afterwards, we headed to the AmCham 46th Annual Conference where I was lucky enough to meet the President of Singapore. We concluded our day by meeting Anthea Ong, a Nominated Member of Parliament. She is an activist for the unheard people in Singapore – the homeless, differently abled and poor – and I found her influential and inspiring. We discussed global issues like the Rohingya Muslim crisis and the effects of climate change on Antarctica.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise?

I expected to meet interesting people and learn about the US Embassy, but my expectations were blown out of the water. I feel very fortunate to have gotten to spend the day with Ms Stephanie, an articulate, caring and impactful person. Her stories about raising her own daughters, the sacrifices she has made for her country, and her thoughts on how to be a better person were incredibly motivating.

The best surprise was the behind-the-scenes look I got of the embassy, and interacting with Pepper, an AI-enabled robot at the Mastercard Innovation Center.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

If people like Ms Stephanie, who wants to make change and solve problems, are in positions where they are being heard, our future will be bright. I aspire to be as respected and accomplished as her one day!

**Rubab Khan, 17, Pakistani**

School: Overseas Family School  
Ambassador: Anita Nergaard, Norway

Why did you want this opportunity?

To explore and learn. By gaining insight into the job of a female ambassador, I wanted to strengthen my understanding of cultural integration and of representing my country in an international environment. I also wanted to learn from fellow women how to approach challenges, communicate effectively, think smartly and handle people empathetically.

How did you spend your time together?

We first attended the Singapore Maritime Technology Conference (SMTTC). I then had lunch with the ambassador and later attended some presentations from start-up companies. We also attended the SMTTC R&D Seminar where awards were presented by Her Excellency. We ended the day with the Maritime Party of the Year, organised by the Norwegian Embassy.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise?

While I expected a learning experience, it went beyond my expectations. Not only did I gain knowledge from Her Excellency, I also received exposure to many other ambassadors, numerous chief executives, brilliant start-ups and more! It was unforgettable.

My day was packed with surprises, but if I were to choose one, it would be hearing the speech of Singapore's Managing Director of Microsoft. It was truly enlightening, and gave a real insight into how the company is run.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

After this experience, I'm even more excited to pursue a career in economics, as my ambassador has a PhD in that field. It will be a great success for me if I'm able to take even a little part of the professional path she has taken.



Photo by Ahmad Iskandar

**Olivia Thacker, 11, British**

School: Dulwich College (Singapore)  
High Commissioner: N Lynn McDonald, Canada

Why did you want this opportunity?

I've learnt a lot about unfair pay for women recently, and I wanted the opportunity to see a successful woman at work, so I applied.

How did you spend your time together?

First, I met some of Ms McDonald's colleagues – they were really nice. They explained what they did and I found it all very interesting. The best bit was talking to a lady about fake passports (Canada Border Services Officer) and trying to spot the difference between real and fake ones. Afterwards, we went out for lunch and met some of the other Ambassadors for a Day. We ended the day at the Oceans Summit.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise?



I expected Ms McDonald might sit with me and talk through all the people she would email and what type of decisions she would make and watch them talk,

but it was really interactive and much more fun than I thought. It was an amazing day and I got a pass that said I was the High Commissioner of Canada for the Day!

The biggest surprise was being able to attend the Oceans Summit Partnership and seeing Ms McDonald talk to a big crowd of people; I thought it was very inspiring.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

I think it has definitely given me options because I love to help my classmates with problems. I'm very happy and thankful that I got the opportunity at a young age and that I have a variety of job options in this area to choose from.

**Juliette Honor Botos-Lehavy, 14, American**

School: Saint Joseph's Institution International (SJII)  
Ambassador: Simona Halperin, Israel

Why did you want this opportunity?

To help me acquire a view on how national matters that an ambassador identifies and pursues are processed in terms of communication and representing nations in a foreign country. Witnessing such a dignified career in action can help me understand how a well-functioning workplace can effectively overcome challenges.

How did you spend your time together?

We travelled to a seminar at NUS about the Indonesian elections. I engaged with Ambassador Halperin's staff, discussing the upcoming Independence Day celebration, recognising 50 years of Singapore-Israeli relations.



I also attended a discussion on the Makeathon that the Israeli Embassy is collaborating with Tikkun Olam Makers to bring to life. I was fortunate to also meet other ambassadors at a cocktail event and it was an honour to talk to such influential figures.

What did you expect from the day? What was the biggest surprise?

I expected a number of formal events and meetings regarding day-to-day celebrations and situations that an ambassador may encounter; however, I was exposed to much more. I saw Ambassador Halperin represent Israel at the cocktail reception and take part in discussions that supported things she was clearly passionate about, such as the Makeathon, which is striving to help people with disabilities become more independent.

The biggest surprise was conversing with the various ambassadors and gaining knowledge about such an important job from another perspective. I'm so grateful for their kindness and openness when sharing their experiences.

Do you think this experience might affect what you choose to do for a career?

After my day with the ambassador, I am intent on exploring the world of diplomacy. The role of representing your country in a foreign place is so important for diversity and a deeper understanding of other cultures. *el*

**What strong, smart, confident and determined girls – our future is in very good hands!**

Be sure to pick up the July issue for write-ups from our other seven Ambassadors for a Day.

For more photos, check out [expatliving.sg](http://expatliving.sg)