Reaching out with a gloved hand

Charmain Tan from sunny Singapore came up with an eco-friendly glove that can operate a touch-screen phone in the cold. **TEH SHI NING** reports

DESIGNING and selling winter gloves out of tropical Singapore is counterintuitive to say the least. But designing it has been the 23-year-old Charmain Tan and her co-founders of EVOLV are not about to give up on what they believe is a solution worth sharing.

"People think ‘Okay I’m buying gloves but they are made in Singapore, where don’t need gloves?’ So there is some scepticism,“ she says.

But inspiration for the touch-screen friendly gloves actually struck in the deep of winter, while Ms Tan was on her one-year-long National University of Singapore (NUS) Overseas College programme in Stockholm from 2010 to 2011. Frustrated at being unable to use her new iPhone without removing her gloves and exposing her fingers to the biting cold, Ms Tan started hunting for gloves to use with touch-screen devices.

All she could find, however, were thin acrylic ones with conductive tips. “It’s not very pretty at all. They feel synthetic, artificial and were not warm enough for Sweden’s harsh winters,” says Ms Tan. But the thickest warmer mittens she preferred geared number some when text messages continued typing on a touch-screen phone.

That was how she dreamt up a conductive glove within minutes, with a cap that flips over to reveal gloved fingers that can operate iPhones and iPads in winter.

But that idea alone was not enough to persuade her to set up a business – despite having ambitions to do so since the age of 14.

“If you didn’t actually have the actual products, you’d have nothing to sell and people would not want to buy it,” says Ms Tan. Ms Tan discovered that those who create products are engineers – computer engineers coming up with an app or software, or a mechanical engineer coming up with a physical product, says Ms Tan. A statistics undergraduate, she could only envision herself entering into a fashion or events services business – a view that was challenged by her internship with a media company in Stockholm. “My boss was not media-trained. She was commerce-trained, and modestly involved quite complicated technology. After observing all that, I just thought, it’s impossible to do a product even if you’re not an engineer,”

She decided then to call when an initial iteration of her team’s business plan for a European continent was marked among the top three in Sweden. In May 2011, Flett was born. The name stands for Fun in English Tech Eid. Ex-pli- cate Ms Tan.

“I was influenced by the eco-friendly culture in Sweden. It’s a very green society. You don’t want to solve a problem only to create another problem, so I wanted eco-friendly gloves.”

These are made of organic bamboo yarns instead of acrylic, while the external nylon is fashioned out of recycled polyurethane.

But Flett also captures some of her hopes for the team. “I believe the way to get people to work is when they work not because they have to, but because they want to. So we’re all about having fun while we work,” she says.

What began as four Singaporean co-founders living in different time zones and communicating mostly via Skype and WhatsApp, has now grown to a team of seven, with three part-timers.

To get started, Ms Tan roped in an industrial designer friend, then based in the US, to help do sketches for the gloves she had in mind. Those were then produced in China, where her fellow NUS undergraduate, who was on a similar exchange programme in Shanghai, could act as a contact point for suppliers and manufacturers.

After Ms Tan returned to Singapore last year, yet another member of the team was still in Stockholm and could conduct market studies and reach out to the retailers there.

To secure funding, Ms Tan and her team pitched their business idea to NUS Enterprise over Skype. The only slot for such interviews was at 5am in the morning Singapore time – 3am, Swedish time. “That we were like, ‘we just got to do it!”

NUS Enterprise liked the idea, but could not confer anything till the Flett team were back in Singapore. “So right after I came back to Singapore, that very week I pitched to NUS Enterprise and then I pitched to Spring Singapore,” says Ms Tan.

They received funding under Spring’s Veld Startups scheme – which has since been replaced with one called ACI Startups. Before that grant had been fully disbursed, Flett has also secured pre-venture capital backing from Best Bet Ventures.

Even after coming come way from that seed of an idea in Sweden, Ms Tan says giving up on the business is a thought that crosses her mind often.

“I can tell you, 20 per cent of the time, I’m thinking of giving up because it’s just too tough. But I’d also say to other entrepreneurs, just never give up. All problems can be solved, it just takes some time and faith.

She recalls a recent production delay as an example: “That was a very big ‘Oh no, what happened next?’! We knew the production team had been working very hard on it and it was really something beyond our control. So we had to think about how to convince our buyers, give them more perks, so that they would not be as affected by the delay in shipment.”

In Flett’s case, proximity to its markets remains a major challenge. Though its touch-screen gloves are stocked in Singapore’s OC and Epic Lifestyle, Flett’s key markets are still Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the US and Canada, Ms Tan says.

While most local start-ups think of going abroad as a way of reaching beyond Singapore’s market, Flett had to start abroad simply by virtue of its winter product.

“I’m selling food, I know the market is here. I can go down the road and say ‘Shall we have coffee?’ I’d like to pitch my business to you.”

It’s not just for expats. She needs someone who speaks Swedish to convince buyers that though we speak a different language, we’ve got a real good idea, says Ms Tan. Also, travel to attend trade shows abroad. At first these were entrepreneurial ones, and then investors’ fairs. Last month, Flett was at two business-to-consumer shows in Sweden and California.

Before she graduated in July, there was also the stress of juggling a final-year business with assignments and final-year exams. “But I told myself, this is what I want to do so I’ll just have to manage my time better. All the time I was thinking, ‘How do I wish I was not studying so that I could just focus on the business.’

Now she can, though half her team is still in university and bemoan part-time — yet another challenge. But there are bigger dreams to keep working for.

Flett aims to go beyond its gloves to other fun, eco-friendly products. Smart textiles add much value beyond daily use, Ms Tan says, citing the example of recycleable clothes for elderly people with dementia.

“Our dream is not just to do gloves, but come up with other eco-friendly, washable products. And we want to be able to globalise, since these gloves were born global,” Ms Tan says.