It’s a sunny Wednesday afternoon in Singapore. Michelle Kwan is at a public library, surrounded by children. “Who likes to read?” asks the soon-to-be 31-year-old. There is silence as the kids, who are blissfully unaware that they are in the presence of a figure skating legend, continue to stare at her. “No-one? Guys, this is a LIBRARY! You’ve got to love reading to be here!”

Former figure skating champ Michelle Kwan is contemplating the next chapter in her book of life

By Dora Cheok
Photography Raymond Lee
While Kwan hasn’t formally announced her retirement from the sport that’s garnered her two Olympic medals, five world titles and nine US championships, these days, she’s more likely to be found at a library than an ice rink, albeit for a different reason than what has brought her to Singapore.

Kwan is currently pursuing a master’s degree in international affairs at Tufts University’s Fletcher School in Boston. She’s also the first American Public Diplomacy Envoy for the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. It is this particular role that has brought her to this part of the world today, and it’s obvious from her interaction with the children at the library that it’s something she truly enjoys.

Kwan, who is widely acknowledged to be the most decorated figure skater in US history, shares her thoughts on her diplomacy work and a message to young people everywhere with Reader’s Digest Asia.

**Reader’s Digest: What do you do as a US Public Diplomacy Envoy?**

**Michelle Kwan:** I tell young people about my story, the things I’ve learnt through sports. I talk about falling and getting up, as in physically getting up after falling in front of an Olympic crowd; I talk about having a good attitude. These are things that I hope young people and students can apply to their lives.

I visit countries and talk to people, open a dialogue and share ideas. I speak to the youth who are our future leaders. I want to hear their opinions on the US and opinions about the world in general. It’s important to reach out and to get to know people in other countries. You have to open your mind to diversity.

**What do you hope to accomplish in this capacity?**

I want to try and make a difference in young people’s lives. I hope to encourage them through something I say. A light bulb might just go off and they might go, wow, I should be better organised, I should approach sports in a different way, or I should do this or do that. It might be just a small shift in their thinking, but if you look at the big picture, it’s a big change. Just the idea of making a difference – that’s what I want to do.

**You kept your education as a priority throughout your figure-skating training and career. Was this ethic self-driven, or was it something that your parents wanted for you?**

It was definitely self-driven, but also something that was encouraged by my parents. More than encouraged actually. When I was 17, I couldn’t picture myself at 30. I never thought about what came after skating. I was really encouraged to keep up with my studies, and I realised, when I looked around the skating community, that there were times when skaters neglected their studies, and as soon as they walked out of the skating rink, it was like, what’s next? That’s unfortunate, because you have to start from there, as opposed to continuing your education as well as your sport.

Although it’s definitely hard to manage and juggle at times, you can still focus on both things. And
I think that there's a lot of pressure for any 17-year-old – wanting to go to school, applying to universities, getting a job. But in sports, especially at the Olympics, it's magnified, because there's just so much media focus on it. There's a lot of expectation from the public, from coaches and parents as well as yourself. I think having a good attitude is very important. You have to put things into perspective, to be able to say that this is a sport, and landing a triple lutz is not a life or death situation. You have to realise it is only a competition.

**But it was more than that – it was a dream for you. You were at the top of your game, but you’ve never won the Olympic gold.**

I consider the Olympics as only one of my dreams. One of many, many dreams in my life. I see life as a book. There are so many chapters in this book and while skating is a big chapter of my life, it is only one chapter. What is so interesting is that six years ago, I couldn’t imagine travelling with the US State Department as an envoy. I couldn’t imagine representing my country at the Olympics. It’s one of those choked-up moments in life.

**If there was one thing you’d like to say to those aspiring in both sport and education, what would it be?**

You know, from my experience here, the environment is so focused on academics that the recurring question is, is it OK to focus on sports? My answer is yes.

I’ve learnt through figure-skating lessons about teamwork and hard work, about never giving up, about dedicating yourself to something, and about dreaming big and trying to make these dreams come true. These are things that don’t apply just to sports; they are values that make you successful in life as well.

I believe that sports can make a positive impact in the lives of students. I’m not saying, neglect your studies and go play a sport. There needs to be a balance. My parents would say, “If you don’t finish this paper, you can’t go to the rink.”

You have to find that balance between sports and studies. You have to make both priorities and make time for both. It’s all about time management; it’s all about balance.

**Why did you decide to go into international relations? Can you give us some insights about your life as a graduate student?**

When I speak to young people, I say to them that you know me as a skater and now I’m travelling as an envoy. But what you don’t know is that I’m still in grad school. I’m doing a lot of the same things you are – going to the library, researching and writing papers. People can’t really see the connection between skating and diplomacy. But there is a real connection.

Travelling all over the world has been an eye-opening experience. Meeting different people, experiencing different cultures and different values, these are the things that have opened my eyes to international relations and made me want to know more and want to learn more about other countries.