

# THE STRAITS TIMES

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## An Eldercare Special By Jimmy Yap

Like many business school students, Jeremy Wong, a 24-year-old from the National University of Singapore (NUS), is eyeing a high-flying career in the world of business. He is currently in his second year, and is planning to major in Finance in his final year.

But unlike many of his fellow students, Jeremy has more than money on his mind. Jeremy is a volunteer with TOUCH Seniors Activity Centre in Geylang Bahru. Together with Stella Soh, a second year Science student at NUS, he visits, Madam Wong Mui, 79, Madam Teo Goon Huay, 91, and Madam Nyaterang, 78, every other week.

The visits are short, about 45 minutes each, but they make a difference.

Said Madam Wong in Cantonese: " I am very happy to have visitors. They come in, sit down and chat. I am not so lonely." Madam Wong lives alone in a one-room flat in Geylang Bahru. She is paralysed from the waist down and this, combined with her age, means that she can only move about in her wheel chair, and even then with difficulty. As she is not very mobile, the visits are the highpoint of her day.

Jeremy also helps out at the centre itself, which was set up in 1998 to serve the social and recreational needs of the elderly in Geylang Bahru. During the university holidays, he goes to the centre at least once a week to help out with the activities.

At the centre, he, together with the other volunteers, hands out materials for arts and crafts and sets up games. The games are simple and cheap to put together. Imagine bowling but with discarded drink cans for pins and crumpled paper for a ball. Another game involves shooting toy soldiers with a rubber band. All very simple, but all involving physical activity and co-ordination to keep seniors active.

Jeremy is one of about 60 volunteers at the centre, which has four full-time staff including centre supervisor Hannah Liew. Said Hannah: "Our volunteers do many things. They join in the activities that we organise in the centre, they provide escorts for medical appointments, they help with home and hospital visits and they help conduct activities. For example they act as buddies during outings and help organise parties as well.

"If it wasn't for our volunteers, we wouldn't be having parties and outings because it would be too hard to organise."

These outings aren't just pleasure trips for the elderly. Said Hannah:" We brought them out on an outing to the beach, and some of them said it was the first time they

had ever been to the beach. We took pictures and when we showed it to them, two sisters cried. They had never had their pictures taken before."

Jeremy got involved with community service when he entered university. He joined the Community Service Club and decided that he wanted to work with the elderly. "I have a granny of my own and I wanted to learn how to get closer to her. I also think the elderly have more interesting stories."

Both Jeremy and Stella struggle during the visits because the people they visit only speak Cantonese, Hokkien or Malay. Jeremy speaks Teochew while Stella speaks some Cantonese. However, both of them, are trying to brush up on their various languages. They don't let the language barrier hold them back though. Said Stella: "I feel that we provide a listening ear. We may not understand every thing but being someone they (the elderly) can talk to is helpful."

A listening ear and a helping hand are often all that is needed. At last year's Christmas Party at the Civil Service Club in Tessensohn Road, an elderly man had to go to the bathroom and Jeremy helped him by holding his hand and bringing him there. Said Jeremy: "It is very touching to know that you can help just by holding someone' s hand."

According to Hannah, most of the elderly will not go to these parties unless there are young volunteers around to help them.

Both Jeremy and Stella were initially worried about working with the elderly as neither of them has any experience in this area. Stella was afraid that they would be unapproachable or unfriendly. However, she soon realised she was wrong. Said Stella: "I found that it is totally not the case. They are very approachable and friendly."

## **Caring for the elderly**

Jeremy and Stella volunteer at the TOUCH Seniors Activity Centre in Geylang Bahru. The centre occupies what used to be the void deck in Block 61.

According to centre supervisor Hannah Liew: "The aim of the centre is to focus on meeting the social and recreational needs of the elderly."

The centre, which serves about 380 elderly residents of one-room flats in the vicinity, boasts nearly 60 visitors a day. It is a hub of activity where fun is shared and laughter, often heard. Every week-day the elder gather to chat with friends, watch television or take part in the numerous activities organised by the centre. Structured activities take place from 2 to 3 pm: Bingo on Monday, Art & Craft on Tuesday, Exercise on Wednesday, and Games on Thursday and Friday.

The centre also helps the elderly by writing letters, filling forms and handling medical appointments. Said Hannah: " We try to visit everyone weekly. For the frail elderly, we call them everyday."

Because of the limited resources, the centre is trying to rekindle the kampung spirit where everyone looks out for each other. Said Hannah: "What has been most rewarding is I see them grow. They didn't dare to cross boundaries before. Now, they've learned to care for each other and look out for each other."

There are a total of 19 such centres around Singapore. Together with the 11 Neighbourhood Links, these places are hubs for interaction, volunteer work and intergenerational activity.

For more information and a list of where these centres are located, go to <http://www.mcids.gov.sg>. Click on "Services" then choose "Eldercare Services".

You can also call the SAGE helpline for seniors at 1800-3538633.