



Patients. At the Heart
of All We Do.

*Inspirational
Patient & Caregiver
Award Winners 2011*



Our *Inspirational* Patients

CGH

Mr Abdul Muhaimin Bin Abdul Malik	5
Mr Chng Joo Cheng	6
Mdm Jane Lim Siew Cheng	7

KKH

Mr Goh Chun Hui	8
Ms Tan Lay Sing	9
Ms Phyllis Yap Njuek Phing	10

SGH

Mr Kwek Joo Kwang	11
Mr Lim Zi Yang	12
Mr Mohideen Pillai Syed	13
Mdm Ng Gek Eng	14
Mr Kenneth Tan Ting Feng	15

NCCS

Ms Elizabeth Poey Cheng Wah	16
Mdm Quek Peck Eng	17

NHCS

Mr Kalaiselvan s/o Kalian	18
Ms Salina Binte Mohd So'ot	19

NNI

(Late) Mr Ong Geok Lam	20
------------------------	----

SNEC

Mr Clarence Chan Hok Wah	21
--------------------------	----

SHP

Mr Jeffrey Goh	22
Mr Seow Yoke Beng	23
Mdm Teo Pui Gek	24

Our *Inspirational* Caregivers

CGH

John & Martina Lim	26
Ms Belinda Layson Malate	27
Ms Suhana Binte Suhaimi	28

KKH

Ms Cheng Fong Mui	29
Ms Sharon Sia	30
Mdm Amanda Soh Siok Hong	31

SGH

Mdm Anjana Rai Chaudhuri	32
Mr Lee Peng Lee	33
Mdm Leela d/o Ramalingam	34
Mr Mok Siow Juay	35
Mr Salam Ismail	36

NCCS

Mdm Leow Yuh Eng	37
Ms Sharon Tay Siew Kee	38

NHCS

Mr Ravinder Prasad Pathak	39
Mdm Sarah B Binte Abdul Rasid	40

SNEC

Mdm Fong Kam Ngoh	41
-------------------	----

SHP

Mdm Ann Nah Miow Sim	42
----------------------	----

*Our Inspirational
Patients*





The Man With The Plan



“He’s unlike any other patient,” says EN Farhana of Ward 17, CGH, “he never gives up, never complains despite the pain and he is always accommodating and agreeable,” referring to 21-year-old Abdul Muhaimin Bin Abdul Malik who had a brush with death, when he was flung off his motorbike and run over by a lorry.

That was on 6 April 2010, a day after his 21st birthday and it has since been seven months of treatment, numerous surgeries and countless hours of painful physiotherapy to repair the damage to his abdomen, pelvis, urinary tract, bowels, legs and more.

“My physiotherapist said that I should be able to walk by next year, but I can walk now,” says Muhaimin proudly and with good reason too, because he is already walking unaided. That is because he had a plan. As soon as he was conscious, unaffected by the morphine he was given for the pain, Muhaimin had already drawn up in his mind a timeline by when he should be able to sit up on his own, when he should be able to wheel himself around, use his crutches, etc. and by when he should be walking around unaided. Looks like he is way ahead of his schedule!

For this active young man who runs and plays soccer regularly, the two months he was bedridden was probably the toughest. But that did not dampen his spirit. Refusing to be dependent on painkillers, Muhaimin forced himself to be cheerful, despite the pain. “The people who came to see me were all so lively that I had to make myself lively too,” he explains.

Today, Muhaimin is looking forward to going to NTU where he will be studying Mechanical Engineering. The accident may have forced him to defer his studies for a year but not his dreams. The eldest of four kids, Muhaimin is hoping to do well in school and secure a good job so that he doesn’t have to burden his parents. Now that’s what I call ‘The Man with the Plan’.



*Return
of the Writer*

It all happened one morning in May when out of the blue, Mr Chng Joo Cheng, 65, woke up and found himself unable to move or talk. He had a stroke — a stroke that left him unable to speak and the whole of his right side paralysed. As a result, Mr Chng spent two months bedridden in CGH and stayed a further three months at a community hospital.

“We see this kind of patients all the time,” says SN Veronica Tan of Ward 28, CGH. “Many of them, after a stroke feel very depressed especially when they are old, they tend to want to give up, but not Mr Chng whose ‘never say die’ attitude was really refreshing.”

Mr Chng found it extremely difficult at first, to cope with his disability because being the independent man that he was he now had to rely on his family and maid for everything. But, he refused to give up or give in to his condition, insisting instead to work hard towards his recovery. It was his willingness to participate in the physiotherapy sessions and his determination to recover that impressed Veronica so much that “even after all these months, I can still remember him,” she says.

“I used to enjoy my life,” says Mr Chng who admits that he is not well prepared to cope with life after the stroke and is still adjusting to his new lifestyle. A retired teacher, he loved going out to meet his friends for a chat or for a drink but it was when he was writing that he felt most alive. A freelance writer, Mr Chng often pens his thoughts and submits his articles to the Chinese press. But of course, the stroke changed all that. Perhaps not for very much longer.

Today, despite countless therapy sessions and vast improvements to his condition, Mr Chng still has a long way to go but he remains motivated and positive, hoping to one day soon, return to the life he once knew and indulge again in his passion for writing.

Just weeks after her husband's demise, Jane Lim Siew Cheng was diagnosed with Stage 2A breast cancer. For many, that would have been enough to push them over the edge and into depression, but not Jane. "So what if you have breast cancer, it's not the end of the world!" she says.

"I believe cancer comes about through stress," says Jane who admits that she used to lead a really hectic life. She was in real estate then but was also working long hours helping her husband in his practice. Realizing what could have contributed to the cause of cancer, today Jane advises all to take a step back to look and listen to their body — to take time to breathe, to rest and to find ways to de-stress. Exercise, for example, is one good way.

Looking at Jane, it is hard to believe that she is a cancer survivor. Her appearance alone gives hope to many. At 53, Jane looks youthful, pretty and very elegant. This, plus her warm and friendly personality as well as her positive outlook to life has brought many hope and encouragement. "I've spoken to many patients who have been counseled by Jane. They feel really relieved and encouraged after talking to her," says NC Sophia Chua of Clinic J at CGH.

Together with NC Sophia, Jane is actively involved in the hospital's 'Look Good, Feel Better' programme, which gives her the opportunity to reach out to other breast cancer patients to share with them her experience and to encourage them to look forward and be happy. One way is through the use of prostheses and wigs. Every first Friday of the month, you can find Jane at the hospital helping patients with fittings. In fact, you can often hear her saying to the patients, "It's not the end of the world; no breast, got prosthesis; no hair, got wig!" Sometimes she even goes down to their homes to do the home-fitting service at no extra charge. This is helpful especially when the patient is coping with the side effects of the chemotherapy treatments such as fatigue, hair loss, etc. She does all this because she strongly believes that life is better when you look and feel good.



Look Good, Feel Better



Mdm Jane Lim Siew Cheng



“Thalassemia can be debilitating — the patient requires regular blood transfusions and experiences bouts of tiredness, headaches, dizziness, fatigue and a lack of concentration, yet 22-year-old Goh Chun Hui is determined to live life to the fullest,” says Vincent Lim, KKH’s Corporate Communication Assistant Director.

Despite being born with such a condition, Chun Hui insists on living a normal life. As his bone marrow is unable to produce red blood cells, blood transfusions once every four weeks or so is what he has to live with for the rest of his life! The alternative would be a bone marrow transplant. Unfortunately, both his parents and his sister are not suitable donors.

Having to live with frequent blood transfusions and daily medication plus countless number of full blood counts, cross-matches, doctor’s visits, blood tests and screenings, etc., can be disruptive, not to mention disheartening but Chun Hui makes it a point to stay positive. He is also fully aware that this condition puts him and others like him at a disadvantage. It is precisely for this reason that he takes it upon himself to educate and inspire them, not only by staying positive but also by sharing his own experiences and keeping them updated of the latest developments in the Thalassemia world. Chun Hui is particularly excited about gene therapy and although this is still a couple of years away, he has already started spreading hope to others. He does this through his website and his blog as well as through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

“Knowing that in spite of his condition, he is positive, hopeful and is lending hope to others, encourages me in the challenges that all of us face as we go through our work and daily lives,” says Vincent.

Like any young man, Chun Hui has his hopes and dreams. He admits that “if not for my illness, I would have loved to take up a full-time job and spend more time doing things like going to the gym, going for holidays, etc.” But not one to allow himself to be set back by a ‘mere’ condition, Chun Hui’s goal is to one day set up a website that attracts high traffic. Looks like he is already heading in the right direction



Thalassemia And Me

17-year old Tan Lay Sing suffers from a condition known as mitochondrial encephalomyopathy, lactic acidosis and stroke, or MELAS for short. Lay Sing was diagnosed with this genetic disorder four years ago. It is caused by defective mitochondrial genes that render the cells in her body unable to produce the energy and power needed for her body to function.

As it affects the body's entire system, mainly the brain, the nervous system and the muscles, Lay Sing has had to endure, besides muscle weakness and pain, recurrent headaches, delusions and hallucinations, bouts of flashes and seizures, loss of appetite, vomiting as well as stroke-like episodes over the last four years.

In her condition, going to school like a normal teenager is totally out of the question. At an age when she most needs to feel normal and accepted by her peers, she does not because "her friends do not understand her condition," says SN Delphine Tan of Ward 46, KKH. Furthermore, having had to miss school has set her back quite a bit and as a result, she feels a tad inferior.

Nevertheless, Lay Sing is determined to get well and where possible function independently. "I've known her for less than a year and already she has created such an impression on me," says Delphine. "She used to be completely dependent on others but now she is able to perform some of her daily activities such as going to the toilet, brushing her teeth and feeding herself — all on her own."

It is amazing how far she has come. "I never thought that with her diagnosis, she can progress so well," says Delphine. "Her sheer determination is simply inspirational."


*It Takes Sheer
Determination*



Ms Tan Lay Sing



*What Doesn't Kill You
Only Makes You Stronger*



“The doctors told me that they didn’t think I would make it but I did,” says Phyllis Yap Njuek Phing, referring to her near-death experience in 2000.

She was experiencing extreme weight loss and even though she had undergone a battery of tests, doctors could not find what was wrong with her. After six months of fever, unexplained fatigue, a lack of appetite and continued weight loss, Phyllis finally admitted herself into the hospital.

She collapsed at the hospital and was unconscious for 48 hours. When she woke up, she panicked. There were tubes all over her. She suspected something serious and she was right. She had Stage 3 ovarian cancer! There was a tumour in her ovaries and she had to undergo an emergency hysterectomy.

Once the initial shock had passed, Phyllis was determined to get well. “I want to do things on my own,” she told the doctors, “I don’t want to have to rely on the nurses.” And, although she was ready for it, she still had a tough time coping. She weighed only 38kg, was bald, pale and frail. “I was like one of those war prisoners you see on TV,” says Phyllis.

Phyllis also experienced a bout of depression when one-by-one her chemo buddies died. Realizing the importance of having people to talk to and to share experiences with, Phyllis made a pledge with NC Chew Sen Mei of Ward 43 at KKH. “If everything goes well, I will join your support group!” she promised.

That was the start of a beautiful friendship. What drew Phyllis to Sister Chew was “her consistency, determination and commitment to befriending the patients. She not only helps the patients but their families as well!” says Sister Chew.

Surviving cancer changed Phyllis. Where before she was carefree but reserved and did not talk much because she was quiet and shy, today, “I am more chatty, more thoughtful and more sensitive to people’s feelings. It is still difficult opening up to fellow patients but the appreciation is encouraging,” says Phyllis. She also admits to being closer to her family now. In fact, it was her will to strengthen familial bonds that kept her going. “We had a bond before but we are tighter and closer now,” says Phyllis.



“One moment I was walking to an early lunch, the next thing I knew I was lying in a hospital bed,” says 44-year-old Kwek Joo Kwang who suffered a haemorrhagic stroke in January 2009. A haemorrhagic stroke is when a blood vessel in the brain ruptures. Haemorrhagic stroke accounts for about 20% of all strokes.

The stroke rendered Kwek, an insurance agent (though his passion lies in professional sales training), completely speechless. Not only could he not utter a sound, he also could not move his entire right side. But for Kwek, not being able to speak was worse than not being able to walk. After all, his livelihood depended on it! So, of course, the thought of giving up never once crossed his mind. “To give up means giving yourself zero chance of recovery whereas if you tried, at least there is some chance of recovery,” he reasoned. “I don’t believe that I cannot recover,” claims Kwek, who has always been strong-willed and determined.

Kwek suffers from dyspraxia, which is the inability to perform coordinated movements making it extra difficult for him to relearn how to speak. Although Kwek needs a lot of drilling and a lot of repetition to build his muscle memory, he never gave up. He took two weeks just to learn two words, but it did not matter. “As long as there is improvement, I will keep on going,” says Kwek, who never takes ‘no’ for an answer.

It is this unwavering willpower that inspired Deirdre Tay, Kwek’s speech therapist at SGH. “He is the first patient I have ever met who never complains about the exercises he had to do. He will not only do them, he’ll do more. From him, I have learned that there is nothing one cannot achieve if one puts one’s whole heart and mind into it,” says a very inspired Deirdre.


If It’s To Be, It’s Up To Me



*I'm Lucky I Have
Lymphoma*

Mr Lim Zi Yang



He had just come home with a degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Queensland in Australia. He hardly even had time to settle in back home when, out of the blue, he started experiencing numbness in his leg. A check-up revealed that he had tumours in his spine. A biopsy confirmed that they were cancerous. While the smaller ones could be treated with chemotherapy, the main one had to be removed surgically.

For most, hearing the 'C' word would have been devastating, but not 25-year-old Lim Zi Yang. "I was more worried about the spinal surgery than I was of the fact that I had cancer," says Zi Yang. "I was worried I would not come out of it alive." But survive it he did. And, if he could survive that, surely he could survive learning how to walk again or going through chemotherapy!

"What's special about Zi Yang is that whenever he comes for his chemotherapy you can surely find him talking to the other patients, sharing his own experience with them," says SNM Annie Lau of Ward 48 at SGH. "Most patients are just concerned about themselves, about their own comfort, but not Zi Yang," remarks Sister Lau, "he cares about the others."

But Zi Yang doesn't see what he does as anything special. "They are there, so I talk to them," says Zi Yang simply. What he does not realize is that by talking to them, he is helping them see how lucky they are because of all the cancers, lymphoma is probably the most treatable. Zi Yang himself admits that he is thankful and grateful that it is lymphoma because it is most responsive to treatment.

It is this attitude of always looking at the positives rather than the negatives that sets Zi Yang apart from most men his age. "I used to just want to earn lots of money and be successful but now I am looking for a more balanced life," says Zi Yang who can hardly wait to get back to his normal life because "I'm young and I've got a lot to look forward to!"

Wearing a stoma bag is nothing new to 43-year-old Mohideen Pillai Syed. After all, he wore one for a year after his colon surgery in 2006. What is new, however, is that he would now have to wear it for the rest of his life! Even for someone who is familiar with wearing a stoma bag, this can be discomfoting. "I was upset for about one week," says Mohideen and one week was all he needed to pick himself back up, accept his fate and make a new life for himself which includes adjusting to his new diet.

Mohideen's condition, which is known as short gut syndrome, means that he has to really watch what he eats. His diet consists of one bag of Total Parenteral Nutrition or TPN for short, which is pumped into him via his central line while he sleeps at night and in the day, six sachets of Oral Rehydration Salts (ORN) mixed with water and two small packs of a nutritional beverage. That's it, and this is all he will be eating today, tomorrow and everyday for the rest of his life! In food paradise Singapore, this is certainly not for the weak-minded!

"I don't feel hungry or thirsty," says Mohideen who craves nothing. He can't even remember what his favourite foods are because he has completely willed food out of his mind. What's on his mind, though, is running.

"My knees hurt when I don't run," says Mohideen, a regular marathoner, who has completed at least 10 marathons. For now, however, he has to settle for brisk walking though his heart and mind are set on the Sundown Marathon in May 2011 when he hopes to run his first 10km after a very long while.

"We've known Mohideen for a few years now," says NC Hoon Jiok Peng of Ward 47 Colorectal Surgery at SGH. "He has been through so much, yet never once has he ever said that he wanted to give up."

Sister Hoon and her team of nurses are simply in awe of this man who, despite it all, still remains cheery and positive. "He has such a strong spirit," says one. But another aptly sums him up. "He is a warrior!"



It Takes a Strong Man

Mdm Ng Gek Eng was diagnosed with leukemia in April 2008 and less than six months later underwent stem cell transplant. The months leading up to the transplant were hard for Mdm Ng; and the months that followed weren't all that smooth-sailing either! In a week, she could be at the hospital twice, sometimes even three times to do blood tests and to check for side effects, etc. and whenever her blood count was low, she had to have transfusions. Despite it all, she never gave up.

When she had a really bad case of the shakes from too much steroids, she resumed her passion for origami. She used to do a lot of it in the past but as the years passed, that hobby sort of faded. But, like riding a bike, Mdm Ng never forgot how to fold. Her favourite — flowers. Word got round and her enthusiasm and love for origami spread. That was how the origami programme started. She would conduct classes in the day room for patients and staff and even created a step-by-step instruction booklet for patients to take away with them so that they could occupy their time with folding while waiting to see the doctors at the centre.

The flowers she made, she gave to the other patients to cheer them up or used them to decorate the wards, which according to SNM Chong Lai Ling of the Haematology Centre, was very much appreciated because fresh flowers are not allowed in the wards for fear of infection.

Armed with a smile and a handful of origami flowers, Mdm Ng can often be seen in the wards, visiting patients and sharing with them not only her passion for origami but her life experiences as well; and because she remembers how lost she felt when she was first diagnosed, she makes a special effort to seek out the newly diagnosed patients and offers to mentor them.

What started out as a need to fight the shakes, has become a movement. Origami is therapeutic, not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well. Each fold is made with love and care and each piece, the product of that love. To be presented with one is truly to be presented with a gift from the heart.

Mdm Ng Gek Eng




Gifts From The Heart


For The Love of Dance



At 21, Kenneth Tan Ting Feng had to make a life-changing decision. Diagnosed with severe Aplastic Anaemia in 2008, which means that he is unable to produce blood cells because of a hollow bone marrow, he had to choose to either receive periodic blood transfusions for the rest of his life or undergo a bone marrow transplant. Tired of always having to go to hospital, he chose the latter.

After the transplant, he had to stay in the hospital for about six months and during that time, because he could not exercise, he lost all his strength and muscles. Even his looks changed drastically. But what changed him the most was his outlook on life. "I cherish my life so much more now after the transplant. Before, I did not dare to pursue dance and that was why I took engineering in the polytechnic. Now that I've got a new lease in life, I am not afraid to pursue my first love," says Kenneth.

It is this love for dance that kept him positive. "What kept me going was the fact that I had secured a place in NAFA. I had successfully auditioned for admission but because of the transplant, had to defer my enrolment for a year," explained Kenneth. Nurse Carynn Lee of Ward 72 at SGH where Kenneth spent months recuperating from his transplant was particularly impressed with Kenneth's attitude. "Although I knew Kenneth only after his surgery, what I saw in him really impressed me. Where most patients would have fallen into a depression, Kenneth faced his illness with such drive and determination. He was very positive, knew what he wanted and was planning for his future."

"Kenneth made us realize that one must dare to dream even when faced with obstacles," says SNM Chong Lai Ling from the Haematology Dept, who was especially moved by Kenneth's dance performance during the Bone Marrow Transplant Nite on 28 March 2010. "It was his ability to express his isolation, helplessness and hope during his treatment that truly inspired me," says Sister Chong proudly. "Never for a moment did he give up on his passion for dance or his goal in life!"


Life Goes On


“When I was told I had Stage 3 rectal cancer in 2008, I did not lament my bad luck or ill fate. I did not blame God, neither did I ask ‘Why me?’” says 58-year-old Elizabeth Poey Cheng Wah. “Life went on.”

When she was told that the cancer had returned in March 2010 and that it had spread onto her abdominal walls, again life went on. This time, however, because she knew that all returning cancers meant that it would be Stage 4 with little chance of cure, life would have to go a little faster. “I immediately felt a sense of urgency to live some of my dreams and my earlier ‘to do list’ now became ‘my bucket list’,” shares Elizabeth.

An outdoorsy person by nature, Elizabeth who started out as a PE teacher and ended her 36-year teaching career as a Principal, loved to make people laugh. That is why foremost on her list of things to do was to publish a book about her experiences growing up, do a stand-up comedy act and mount an adventure travel photo exhibition of all the places she had the privilege of exploring.

“In our clinic, we see many patients,” says Dr Koo Wen Hsin from the Department of Medical Oncology at NCCS, “but Liz was quite different.” Always thinking of how and what more she could do to help others, Liz quickly turned her illness around and got it to work for her. “She went through very tough operations but was always humorous and cheerful about the complications and side effects,” says Dr Koo. In fact, her cancer provided the fodder for her comedy show.

These may have been things Elizabeth needed to do for herself, but she also did them to raise funds. Her photo exhibition raised \$4,000 for a school in Nepal, her comedy show raised \$17,000 for NCCS and she hopes to raise at least \$50,000 for two charities — Goducate and Temasek Project — with the sale of her book.

Elizabeth is quite an amazing woman. Not only has she done things that many only talk about, she has done them in just a matter of a few short years and whilst battling cancer at that! Now, that is truly inspiring.





*Mdm Quek Peck Eng
with SSN Tan Tiew Yah*

Warrior Sisters

She has been ostracized, insulted and humiliated. Once when she was at a supermarket soon after her chemo, she was even cursed by some old man who exclaimed to his wife, “See that woman, she’s got cancer, she’s going to die!” But even that failed to dampen her spirit. If anything, it spurred her on to remain strong and focus on her recovery.

Quek Peck Eng was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in February 1997 and in April that year, had both her tubes and ovaries removed. Despite the painful side effects of her first chemotherapy session – “I experienced blurred vision, constipation, breathlessness, excruciating pain in the joints and my organs felt like they were all tied up in knots,” – Peck Eng was determined to get well. Many might have considered it a death sentence, but not Peck Eng who strongly believes that “with strong moral support from patients’ self-help groups, doctors, nurses, family and friends, that death sentence can easily be dismissed.”

That is why she strives to be a constant source of encouragement to the other patients and for the past 13 years have been providing moral support to almost 69 of them through the SGH-NCC Gynae-Onco support group which she helped set up together with SSN Tan Tiew Yah of Clinic D at NCCS. “She’s my partner and I can always rely on her,” says Tiew Yah. “She’s so jovial that even the depressed patients will come around,” she adds. “It is my nature. I will always joke with them and humour them. It is always nice to hear the patients laugh,” shares Peck Eng.

So devoted is Peck Eng to her support group that even when her cancer returned in 2002 and she herself was undergoing chemotherapy, she still visited the other patients because she knows how important group support is. “Gathering and meeting and sharing of experiences help us to not only develop a more holistic approach to coping with our cancer,” says Peck Eng, “it also helps us to accept our condition better!”



*Mr Kalaiselvan s/o Kalian
with his daughter*

*Now I Can Watch
My Babies Grow*

He presented no symptoms of chest pains or breathlessness yet, all of a sudden, in 2006, he suffered a massive heart attack. Despite surgery, his heart continued to fail until the only option left to him was a heart transplant. But that could take months, maybe even years! So when 49-year-old Kalaiselvan s/o Kalian got his in just two days, he knew that it had to be the work of divine intervention.

But barely a month after his transplant, Kalai suffered a major setback — he developed an infection in his left leg and to save his life, had to have it amputated!

“I thought of committing suicide many times,” admits Kalai, who couldn’t accept that he was now an amputee. After all, he was a fairly active man who enjoyed running around with his two young children. “How am I going to do it? How am I going to take care of my family?” he asked.

His wife, who has always been and will always be, his rock, managed to turn him around. She told him: “God has his purpose. He saved your life so that you can be with your family and watch your children grow up.”

Thankful for the second chance at life and grateful for the care he received during his three-month stay in ICU, Kalai now spends part of his time encouraging other heart patients who are waiting for a transplant, sharing his experiences and offering words of consolation and reassurance.

“Kalai is a very positive person,” says NM Ismail Sheriff from CTICU. “He is thankful to be alive and is so grateful for all the care that we’ve given him and that inspires us to want to do more. If we can do it for him, surely we can do it for our other patients,” declares Ismail.

“I used to spend time with my family, but spending time with them now brings even more joy,” says Kalai. Having almost lost his life, he now sees everything with a new perspective and every moment holds a whole new meaning for him.

Formerly in administration, Kalai is now taking up a computer course and hopes to secure a home-based job soon. Until then though, he just has to ‘settle’ for the best job in the world — watching his babies grow up!

“I thought I was going to die soon,” admits 32-year-old Salina Binte Mohd So’ot when she was first told she had an enlarged heart. She suffered severe breathlessness and she couldn’t get out of bed, much less walk a step. That was almost 10 years ago; and sadly, through the years, her situation only got worse.

Her life completely eroded until May 2009, when her condition hit rock bottom and she had to be implanted with the HeartMate II LVAD, a device designed to help the heart pump blood. That was when she began to at least have some semblance of a normal life. It wasn’t yet ideal and it wasn’t half of what she was used to before she was diagnosed, but at least now, she could go out with her friends and maybe even get a job. “I can go out with my friends any time I want to, it’s just that I need to plan where and when I can go out because I need my batteries,” says Salina, patting the black pouch around her waist containing the batteries needed to power the device.

Traveling, however, is still out of the question. “Before I used to travel a lot,” says Salina reminiscing the good old days when she could take trips whenever she felt like it, “but now it is impossible to travel even though I have more free time since I work only three times a week”.

Yes, Salina has managed to find a part-time job doing administrative duties and although she has more free time now, she spends most of it at the Heart Centre, either for physiotherapy or for tests. But Salina is willing to put up with all of it.

“For someone who has gone through so much, Salina is still very positive and is very compliant to instructions,” says NC Anne Tok of Ward 56. “She is also very obliging and easy to work with,” agrees SSN Zubaidah Hassan, referring to Salina’s willingness to do whatever it takes to get well.

“Right now my health comes first,” says Salina. “My family has sacrificed so much to take care of me so I need to get better for them.”

*I Need To Get Better
For My Family*



Ms Salina Bte Mohd So'ot

Mr Ong Geok Lam had come to NNI for a MIBI heart scan and that was when Jestase s/o Posman, a Patient Services Assistant, got to know him. Jestase, who had been with NNI for over 10 years, had just been posted to the Reception where he had the honour of making Mr Ong's acquaintance.

"I met him only once and that too only for a few moments but I was immediately inspired," recalls Jestase. "What made me notice him at first was how close he and his wife were. While he was talking to the other patients, she stood quietly beside him. I noticed he was talking to one patient in particular, a man who limped in," says Jestase. "Next thing you know he had asked his wife to go down to the pharmacy to buy a walking stick for this man he had just met!" exclaimed Jestase, who in all his working years have never seen such a display of heartfelt generosity.

But that is Mr Ong. "He does this all the time," says Mdm Khee Howe Yee, Mr Ong's wife. "He is such a giving person. From young, whenever he saw a beggar, he would give something," she adds. A family-oriented man, Mr Ong had little or no activities outside the family. He loved music but his favourite pastime was window-shopping with his wife!

Formerly in security, Mr Ong has been retired for many years, but the past few years have been difficult years as he battled with pancreatic cancer and a heart condition. He underwent operations plus radiotherapy but last year, his condition took a turn for the worse and he was in and out of hospital many times. Apparently during one of his medical reviews at NUH, he was told that he had five months to live. "That was what he told me, but I don't know when the doctor told him," says Mdm Khee as she tries to hold back her tears.

After years of fighting, Mr Ong finally succumbed to his illness. He complained of discomfort in his chest and was rushed to hospital on 20 November 2010. He died of Neuroendocrine Tumour of the Pancreas three days later, leaving behind his beloved wife and three sons.

(Late) Mr Ong Geok Lam



*All It Took Was
Just A Few Moments*




*He Conquered
His Blindness*




Imagine going for one of your regular check-ups only to discover that you have a tumour in your brain the size of a tennis ball! Surgery may cause you to lose your eyesight completely, or your sense of smell, or maybe even both. Forego the surgery and you could die!

When Clarence Chan Hok Wah was presented with these options in March 2009, he didn't exactly know how to feel. For someone who leads an active life — he runs his own transport company and who for hobbies, jetskis, golfs, plays soccer, squash and tennis — neither outcome looked good, but he chose surgery.

“When people lose their eyesight, it is usually gradual so if you know you are going blind, you can prepare for it. When I lost mine, it was over a period of just one week,” says Clarence. “It is hard to lose your sight. It is even harder to lose it so suddenly,” adds Priscilla Lim, Medical Social Worker with SNEC. “But I conquered!” declared Clarence.

“Despite having had 30% of his brain removed and having lost his eyesight, Clarence still managed to pick himself up,” says Priscilla. “He picked up the white cane technique all on his own and even learned to play the keyboard despite his handicap,” she adds. “I even went to CDC on my own to tie up with a massage centre to learn to become a masseuse. I'm now WSQ-certified,” says Clarence proudly. Next year he is scheduled to give inspirational talks to the first year students at Temasek Polytechnic.

He may be busy learning and doing new things, but Clarence still has time for others. He visits the old folks' homes as often as he can and whenever he does, he brings with him the joy of music. “When I learned about this award, Clarence immediately came to mind,” says Priscilla, “he is truly an inspiration.”

It was a job hazard. He was in the food supply business and was always entertaining clients. He worked long hours and had little or no time for exercise. He already had borderline hypertension and it looked like it was set to get worse. Fortunately, all that changed when Jeffrey Goh had a wake-up call 14, maybe 15 months ago.

A medical check-up in August 2009 revealed that not only did his hypertension get worse, but his cholesterol level had also shot off the charts. There was also evidence of sugar in his blood and his liver did not look good at all!

“What impressed me about Jeffrey was the way he turned his life around,” says Dr Tan Ngiap Chuan, Director of the SingHealth Polyclinic at Pasir Ris where Jeffrey had been receiving treatment. “Initially, it was difficult for him to accept the fact that he needed medication, but once he did, he managed his life quite well,” reveals Dr Tan.

According to Dr Tan, it is very rare to see someone take charge of his own well-being and transform his life the way Jeffrey has done.

He has been semi-retired for a while now but since his rude awakening, his focus has been on getting well. Today, a healthy diet of brown rice with vegetables and fish or skinless chicken and regular exercise is part and parcel of Jeffrey’s new lifestyle. He swims regularly and runs about 12km every other day alternating with resistance training at the gym.

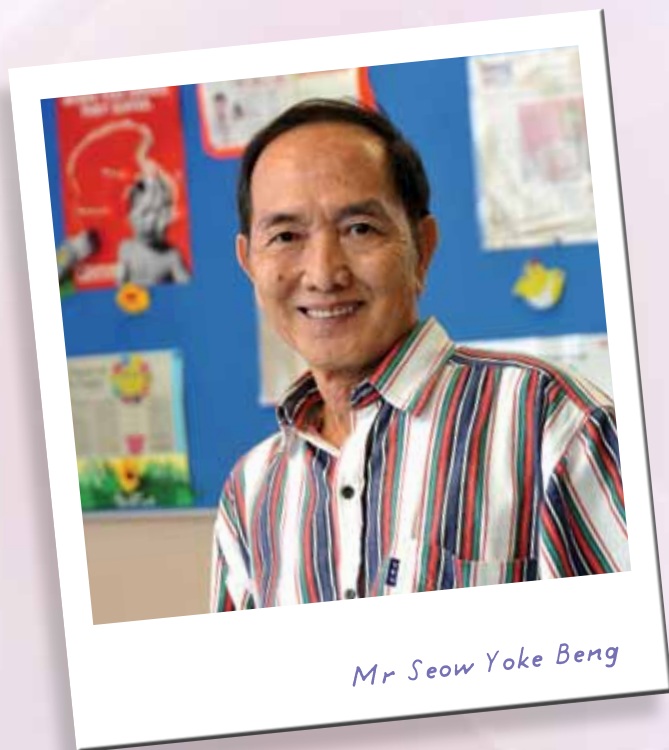
Jeffrey admits that today, at 54, he is enjoying a better quality of life. The icing on the cake was when he was given a clean bill of health by Dr Tan. “My hypertension is under control and my cholesterol has more than halved,” declares Jeffrey proudly.

“People always say ‘no time’, but I say make time,” asserts Jeffrey. “It takes time and self-discipline but you have got to learn to take care of yourself because if you don’t, no one else will!”



*No Time?
I Say, Make Time!*

*Take Away
Dancing
And You Take Away
My Life*



What does a dancer do when he's got Parkinson's? Most would get depressed, but not Mr Seow Yoke Beng! Many would be afraid of having to face such a condition and might even hide the fact from their peers or bosses, but not Mr Seow.

He is not only upfront about it, he even jokes about it! "I tell people there's no need to be afraid, there is nothing to be ashamed of," says this 72-year-old dancer who has been dancing for more than 50 years and despite having had to live with this condition for close to 10 years, remains high-spirited.

"Mr Seow has a pleasant and cheerful demeanour," says Dr Swah Teck Sin, Director of the SingHealth polyclinic at Bedok, who sees Mr Seow once every three months or so. "Despite his medical condition, he remains positive and talks passionately about his love for dancing," adds Dr Swah.

In his hey day, Mr Seow was the 'go-to' man for large-scale dance productions. He has choreographed countless numbers for Chingays as well as for National Day Parades. Today, he is semi-retired but continues to teach ballet and cultural dance to students as young as seven and eight years old. His love though, will always be choreography because he loves creating and planning numbers but "you must know when to let go," says Mr Seow who has since passed the torch on to his students.

"Knowing that an elderly man, with medical conditions and disabilities, and yet is so positive in his outlook in life, and also constantly remaining cheerful, inspired me," explains Dr Swah. "His spirit in dancing is not deterred by his age or medical problems. This is something we ought to emulate: pursue our dreams and always stay cheerful," adds Dr Swah.

"I never think I am sick," says Mr Seow, and no one treats him as if he is. "They treat me normally," he adds. "And I don't feel like my life is being compromised," assures Mr Seow. "I can give up anything but not dancing. Take away dancing and you take away my life!"

*The Lady
Who Always Smiles*



You don't often hear of TB in the intestines because it is extremely rare so you can imagine the surprise when a medical check-up revealed that the blood in her stools was due to the tuberculosis bacteria.

"I was sad, worried and shocked all at the same time," says Mdm Teo Pui Gek. But what probably worried her most was the fact that if she didn't take care, it could easily spread to other parts of her body. Fortunately, her condition could be treated with medication.

The flip side, however, meant that she had to come under the DOT programme or Direct Observation Therapy, where she had to go to the nearest polyclinic everyday for six months for her daily dose of medicine. The only time when she could take her medication at home was on Sundays and public holidays when the polyclinic was closed. "It has to be this strict," says SSN Yeo Chek Cheng of the SingHealth Polyclinic at Bukit Merah where Mdm Teo got her daily medication. "It takes a lot of discipline and most patients won't take their medicine if they were left to do it on their own," adds Sister Yeo.

It is easy to see why patients 'drag their feet' when it comes to taking their medicine because "I had like 10 different kinds of tablets, big and small — mostly big though — and some of them were really bitter," says Mdm Teo. But religion got her through it, that and her will to get well. "I needed to take care of my family so I had to be strong," says Mdm Teo. "If you don't help yourself, who will help you? You can't rely on others!"

Even when you live just a couple of blocks away, it is still tedious to have to come to the polyclinic every day so it is common to see grumpy patients, and that is precisely why Mdm Teo stands out. "I saw her everyday for six long months and she was always so bright and cheery," says Sister Yeo. "Everyone here at the clinic knows her even if they never had direct contact with her," she adds, "she is known as the lady who always smiles and says good morning to everyone!"



*Our Inspirational
Caregivers*

Only the Best for Daddy



It started with a viral infection of the brain in September 2009 but it was the stroke in January 2010 that saw Peter Lim's condition really deteriorate. "He could not walk, he could not even swallow," said his daughter Martina Lim amidst tears.

To see their father whittle down from a tough and independent man to one that couldn't speak and was completely dependent on others was devastating for John and Martina Lim. But thanks to the strong support from family and friends and with the help and care of the hospital's team of doctors, nurses and therapists, the Lims managed to survive what was probably the most trying episode of their lives.

They are at an age when they should be focusing on their own families, yet they spent their every waking moment by their father's side. "My brother and I, we do this out of our willingness to help our dad recover," says Martina, "and for him to know that we care and love him."

John is always finding ways to better care for their father, but most of what they know they learnt from the nurses and the doctors. "They are always keen to learn how to take care of their father, how to feed him, how to change his diaper, how to massage him, etc." says EN Nazliana, or Nazzie as she is more commonly known, from Ward 25 at CGH. "Their attitude is always 'don't fish for me or give me fish, teach me how to fish'," adds Nazzie.

Although the nurses took good care of their father, whenever they could, John and Martina would nurse him themselves. "We did not nominate them because they helped us," says Nazzie, "but because we were very touched by their sincerity and the love and devotion they showed for their father."

"It was very stressful and physically demanding. Looking back I marvel at what I was able to do and go through," says Martina. "I guess it was through the love for our dad and our faith in God that we did. We are not medical professionals so we can't say that we have given him the best care, we can only say that we have given him the best love we possibly can."

It is understandable to want to care for a sick relative. But would you take care of her like she were your own mother if you were not related? Probably not, unless you are Belinda Layson Malate

Belinda has been working for the Lau family as a domestic helper for the past three years. Her main role is to take care of Mdm Chew who, because of a stroke and Parkinson's, is not only non-communicative but also completely bedridden and totally dependent on others.

"The commitment and dedication she shows towards Mdm Chew despite having no kinship to her is what really touched me," says Tan Kog Kng, Medical Social Worker from CGH. "She accompanies Mdm Chew and ensures that she attends all her doctor's appointments. She also takes care of all her daily needs as well as keeps track of her medication and all her supplies."

Belinda is always by Mdm Chew's side, talking to her, massaging her and keeping her fresh and clean all day so that she is comfortable and never in want of anything. "Sometimes in the afternoon, I will turn on the karaoke and sing to Mother," says Belinda, who treats Mdm Chew and her husband, Mr Lau, like her own parents.

Although she has four kids of her own back in the Philippines whom she misses very much, "she willingly extended her contract for another two years because of her commitment to Mdm Chew," says Kog Kng. Sometimes she foregoes her off-days just so she can be with Mdm Chew, and even when she is out, her mind tends to stray back to Mdm Chew. "Sometimes after just one or two hours I start to think about Mother and I want to go home," says Belinda, who on her own accord, not only attended an eldercare course organized by her church but also reads massage books and observes the therapists at work in order to learn new massage techniques.

She has even learned how to cut and perm hair and do facials so that she can treat Mdm Chew to a hair cut and facial once in a while since Mdm Chew is practically home-bound without lift access on their floor. But soon when the lift upgrading programme is completed, "I can take Mother out for some fresh air!" exclaims Belinda.



She Calls Her 'Mother'

One look at Suhana Binte Suhaimi and you would hardly think she is capable of taking care of herself, much less her diabetic mother too. This is because Suhana suffers from cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that impairs body movement and muscle coordination. "She was only four days old when she had severe jaundice," says Suhana's mother, 63-year-old Mdm Hajjah Moona bte Awang, "and then after that she became like this."

Despite her physical disability, she is still able to take care of her ailing mother and even do some simple household chores like washing, cleaning and dusting. Sometimes when her mother is not quite up to it, she will even do the cooking!

Suhana, 33, accompanies her mother to all her medical appointments. She will listen closely to whatever the doctors and nurses have to say regarding her mother's medication, diet, exercise regime, etc. and will make sure that her mother follows them at home. "She will prepare my medicine everyday and will always remind me to take them. Even when she goes out, like to the library to borrow books for me, she will also call back to check," says Mdm Hajjah Moona. "And when I don't feel like eating, she will nag at me."

Suhana admits to a fear of needles but she overcame it just so she could help her mother with her daily injections and blood tests. "She is so brave," says SN Lin Xue Li of the Diabetes Centre at CGH. "It is difficult even for an ordinary person, what more for someone with cerebral palsy, yet she is able to do it so well."

Three days a week while her mother goes to the Muhammadiyah Health & Day Care Centre for Senior Citizens, Suhana attends school at the Society for the Physically Disabled where she is learning to provide administrative support to corporations and hopes to one day get a job so that she can take care of her mother better. "She took care of me when I was young, it is my responsibility now to take care of her," says Suhana



A Daughter's Love



Ms Suhana Binte Suhaimi



Ms Cheng Fong Mui

*Everything I Do,
I Do It for Poh Peng*

It is every mother's dream to have a healthy baby. But what do you do when your first-born is born with Ichthyosis, a genetic skin disorder that presents itself as dry flaky skin that looks like fish scales all over her body?

"I cried and almost fainted when I first learnt about my baby's condition. I felt like it was my fault that she's like that and I was very heartbroken," admits Mdm Cheng Fong Mui. Thanks to her husband's support as well as that of her friends and the team of doctors, nurses and social workers, Mdm Cheng managed to overcome her initial guilt and heartbreak to devote all her time and energy into caring for Poh Peng who is now 19 and a second year ITE student.

Unlike most other children, Poh Peng is extremely susceptible to infections and to boost her immunity, she needs lots of nutritious food and vitamin supplements; and since, over the years, she has also developed arthritis in her limbs, she now also needs fortnightly injections which can be expensive especially for a low-income family!

"Although they are not well-to-do, they are extremely self-reliant," says a very inspired Ms Gina Tan from KKH's Rheumatology Department. "They make do with whatever they have," she adds.

Taking care of Poh Peng is a full-time job and Mdm Cheng is especially meticulous when it comes to cleaning, moisturizing and oiling Poh Peng's skin. "Everything I do, I do it for Poh Peng," says Mdm Cheng. But the true mark of this mother's love was when, even though she was absolutely afraid to have another baby, she and her husband decided to have not one but two more children because "Poh Peng was lonely and was asking for a little brother or sister". The risks paid off because both of Poh Peng's siblings were born normal.

"She is quite an amazing woman. She is hardworking, extremely positive and very self-reliant," says Gina. It is this self-reliance that she tries to imbue in all her kids, especially in Poh Peng, whom she has always insisted should study hard and pursue a normal life despite her medical condition.

Sharon Sia is taking care of her 14-year-old sister who suffers from Congenital Muscular Dystrophy with severe Sclerosis, which means that although she has been growing, her muscles have not!

As a young child, Sharon has always been 'second' to her slightly older brother because her parents favoured boys; and when her younger sister Jin Zhu was born, and handicapped at that, she just knew what kind of life her sister could expect.

Her parents who have since divorced and her brother have all shirked their responsibility, leaving Sharon to take care of Jin Zhu herself. "I've cared for Jin Zhu for 14 years and will continue to do so for the rest of her life," says Sharon who has practically put her life on hold for her sister.

She may be a diploma holder but she knows that this piece of paper will be practically worthless by the time she goes out to work in 10 to 15 years' time. "The doctors say that patients like Jin Zhu hardly live past their twenties," says Sharon who accepts this fate but for now is willing to just give her sister the best quality of life she possibly can. "People say why I bother so much with her studies or taking her to places like Sentosa, but my sister has the IQ and EQ of a normal teenager and although she physically can't, she still wants to do things and see places," explains Sharon who is always telling her sister that "although your life may be short, I want you to live it as best you can so that when it is time for you to go, you will go willingly with no regrets."

Sleep Technologist Lim Mei Lan from KKH's Respiratory Lab who has known Sharon and Jin Zhu for the past one-and-a-half years has this to say: "Sharon is very meticulous in her care of Jin Zhu. She tries very hard so that her sister can have at least a hint of normalcy in her life. Her aim is solely to give her sister this and a quality life."



*I Want to Give Her A
Quality Life*

❦

A Mother's Concern

❦



Jerron Ang was not even three years old when he was diagnosed with retinoblastoma or cancer of the eye; and in order to prevent the possible spread to his other eye, he had to have his right eye completely removed and replaced with a prosthetic one.

As a mother, how do you bear seeing your baby go through something like that? How can you stand watching him suffer not only physical pain, but mental and emotional pain as well? “I was crying all the time,” admits Amanda Soh Siok Hong, Jerron’s mother. “Eat also cry, sleep also cry.” Yet, she had to put on a brave front for her son.

A full-time kindergarten teacher at the time, Amanda had to switch to part-time after just two months because she had to take Jerron to all his doctors’ appointments. Her life was becoming more and more hectic and chaotic. Not only did she have to take care of Jerron, she also had to deal with his temper tantrums, his fears of going blind, of dying as well as his anxiety over constantly being teased at in school. All these, plus she also had to take care of her other child — a daughter who was experiencing emotional trauma at that time because of her fears about having to start primary school in addition to feeling neglected because she thought her mother was spending too much time with her brother!

“I felt very stressed,” says Amanda, who admits to having harboured suicidal thoughts when the situation got a bit too much for her to handle. Thanks to the counselors at her son’s childcare centre, however, she managed to pull through.

Three years have passed. Jerron’s condition has stabilized and he is starting primary one in January 2011. Now what worries Amanda is whether Jerron’s teachers will understand his condition, whether there will be more teasing from the other kids and if so, will Jerron be able to cope.

It is concerns like these that prompted Amanda to start a support group where parents can share their feelings and experiences. “What inspired us was the fact that she is a working mother and a full-time caregiver, yet she still has the time to form a support group!” exclaims NM Ho Poh Hua from the Eye Centre at KKH.



*Enhancing the
Role of Caregiver*

“When my husband was diagnosed with CML (Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia) in January 2002, he went into denial,” says Anjana Rai Chaudhuri, “He thought that if he didn’t think about it, it would go away,” she adds. But Anjana is not that kind of a person; she would not sit by and hope that things would just get better.

What she is, is the type of person who would go out and learn all she can, whether it is of a situation, an illness, anything, as long as it is of interest to her; and her husband’s illness was certainly of interest to her.

Anjana feels that as a caregiver, she could do so much more for her husband. She could provide him with all the information he needed because she believes that “if you know more about the illness, you can fight it!”

Thus began her research and through it, she managed to find a drug for her husband that had the potential to extend his life by at least 10 years. After six months, her husband went into remission and has remained so ever since.

After such an extensive research on CML, Anjana couldn’t just discard it all — it would seem such a waste. “I thought I should put it somewhere so that it is researchable worldwide,” says Anjana. This way, everyone can benefit from the information she had gathered.

In a further effort to extend her reach to others, Anjana also set up an online support group. “I set up the Asian CML support group with the initial objective to get my husband to acknowledge the disease and to talk about it,” says Anjana, but little did she expect the group to grow to more than 1000 members!

Over the years, her website has touched many hearts, especially those of newly diagnosed patients. Her work has also generated so much interest that she has become the point of contact for foreigners who come here for treatment. When they arrive, she not only smiles and extends a warm welcome to them but also makes the effort to get to know them personally and, from among them, she has made some very good friends and has even opened her home to them! Now that is taking the role of a caregiver to a whole new level.

It was a routine check-up that revealed that there was something wrong with her liver. Although she showed no symptoms, her liver was hardening and despite medical treatment, her condition was not improving. When all else failed, Mr Lee Peng Lee's wife was placed on the wait-list for a cadaveric liver transplant. "It is not uncommon to have to wait for a year or more before one is available," says MSW Ow Yong Lai Meng, who has known the Lees since early 2009.

The period before the transplant was extremely difficult for Mrs Lee, perhaps worse for Mr Lee. Although it was hard to be a prime caregiver, it was even harder to have to watch a loved one suffer.

As her body could not rid itself of the toxins, there was always a build-up of toxins in her body. This caused her to have blurred vision, mood swings as well as hallucinations. So, to ensure her safety, Mr Lee had to always be by his wife's side, keeping her calm and relaxed, making sure that she took her medicines. To do this, however, it meant that he had to forego his favourite pastime, which was spending time with his friends. "I used to spend time with my friends but now, no free time so no more social life," says Mr Lee. This may sound insensitive but it was a big sacrifice for Mr Lee. "Being a new retiree, Mr Lee needed to spend time with friends and socialize otherwise he might feel a sense of identity loss," explains Lai Meng.

Mr Lee also tries to run and meditate whenever he can so that he is better able to cope with the physical and psycho-emotional demands of having to care for a sick one. He may even have lost weight as a result of prolonged lack of sleep, but he remains her number one cheerleader and counselor, continually encouraging and supporting her throughout the period of her illness.

In October 2009, Mrs Lee underwent a liver transplant. Though she is doing well, she is still a little weak. But compared to how she was before the transplant, Mr Lee is just grateful that his wife has received a new lease of life and is happy to be able to spend time with her.


*Her Number One
Cheerleader*




She may have seven siblings, but when it comes to taking care of her aged mother who is bedridden and suffers from dementia, Leela d/o Ramalingam is all alone. She is unemployed and so cannot afford to employ a maid to help her with the household chores or with her mother who is completely dependent on her; and because there is no lift access on the floor that she lives, every time her 72-year-old mother needs to go to the hospital for her medical appointments, three, maybe four times a month, Leela has to call an ambulance.

That is a lot of physical, emotional and financial stress for just one person to bear. But Leela is not unfamiliar with the word 'stress'. From young, she has led a stressful life. She has been plagued by chest pains since she was in her teens and over the years, has had to undergo several operations; and now that she has been taking care of her mother for the past few years, she has also had to give up her job as a security officer.

For someone who has so little, Leela has so much to give. Watching her care for her mother is truly inspiring. "When it comes to caregiving, Leela is very hands-on," says NC Saratha Devi from Ward 63C. "She not only observes the nurses and tries to pick up techniques from them, she also actively participates in her mother's care by bringing her for her trolley baths, changing her dressings and all," explains Sister Devi. On many occasions, too, she can be seen singing to her mother and entertaining her with stories.

Leela has made many sacrifices for her mother. She has given up her time, her freedom; but what she misses most is the good old days when she used to host parties at her home. "I love to cook and I'll sometimes invite my friends over especially during New Year," says Leela. She still can, but it takes a lot more effort.

Taking care of her mother all on her own has left Leela with very little time for herself and, on the occasion that she does get the chance, she will take the opportunity to go to the temple to pray for strength and to pray for her mother's health.



*A True Caregiver
at Heart*



*Dedicated to
Treating Her with
Dignity & Respect*



Mr Mok Siow Juay

“She had lung cancer a couple of years ago,” says Mr Mok Siow Juay. “She underwent surgery, had chemo and was fairly stable” until July 2010 that is, when all of a sudden, his wife lost her strength and mobility — she couldn’t walk and needed a lot of support – and, not only could she not speak, she was also experiencing severe memory loss. Apparently, the disease had attacked her brain.

Now that she is completely dependent and requires total care, it is up to Mr Mok to see that she gets it. “It is our responsibility as a family to look after her,” says Mr Mok.

But being a caregiver is tough and it can sometimes take its toll on you. So he tries to rest whenever he can. “When she sleeps, I try to sleep too but it is difficult when I have to clear my work or when I have to handle clients,” says Mr Mok, a Professional Engineer who runs his own company. It is extremely stressful especially when he feels the pressure from both sides — on the one hand, he wants to take care of his wife as best he can and on the other, having to fulfill his obligations to his clients. But, religion keeps him strong and focused.

Not even an injury to his back, an injury he sustained while carrying his wife, can distract him. If anything, it has made him realize even more how important it is for him to take care of himself because the healthier he is, the better he is able to care for his wife.

Mr Mok is tireless in his devotion to his wife’s care. While his efforts in ensuring that his wife’s physical well-being is cared for, it is his concern for her mental well-being that is truly admirable. “She must never see or feel that she is a burden and because you give her that, she fights to get better,” insists Mr Mok. “Once she loses her dignity, she will lose all hope,” he adds. “That is why she must always feel that she is a valuable person; that she is being respected and is treated with dignity.”



A Positive Influence

As a Personal Trainer, motivating clients to get them to stay positive is second nature to 38-year-old Salam Ismail. But little did he realize that this positive-mindedness would one day help him get through the toughest time of his life.

Nursaidah was a close friend and colleague before they started dating in October 2008. It was unfortunate though that just a couple of months into that relationship, Nursaidah was diagnosed with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) or lupus for short – an autoimmune disease where the body’s defences attack its own healthy organs. Unlike most lupus cases, however, Nursaidah’s was extremely resistant to medication and she was in and out of ICU frequently.

The six months or so that Nursaidah was ill were probably the most trying period for Salam. Not only was it physically draining – when he was not at work, he was at the hospital, even at nights, sleeping in the armchair just so he could be by her side – it was also emotionally and mentally draining. Yet he remained positive. His only outlet – a good gym workout.

Salam admits that he had to stay positive for Nursaidah and her family. “I did it for Saidah because she needed to be surrounded with positive thoughts so that she could recover,” he explains.

Unfortunately, Nursaidah’s illness was simply too much for her and she passed away in June 2009. Although Salam was not by her side when she drew her last breath, he takes solace in knowing that he was the last person she spoke to.

Today, Salam honours her passing by taking part in endurance races such as the Sundown Ultra Marathon. Where once he participated in races to either win or better his personal bests, today, Salam takes part in races to raise awareness of SLE.

“I was impressed and inspired by his unwavering support and how he channeled his care in a constructive manner by raising funds for SLE patients,” says Prof Julian Thumboo of SGH’s Rheumatology Department.

Mdm Leow Yuh Eng has two sons. In 2009, her younger son, Chee Heng, was diagnosed with a brain tumour and has had to undergo no less than five operations. Although his tumour has since been removed, Chee Heng still needs to be assisted in all his daily activities. Mdm Leow has, therefore, been devoting all her energies towards caring for her son.

“When he was unable to ambulate on his own, Mdm Leow would assist to transfer him on to his wheelchair,” says MSW Agnes Tan of the Department of Psychosocial Oncology at NCCS, “and even though she herself is not in the best of health, she still brings Chee Heng for his weekly physiotherapy sessions and all his other doctor appointments,” she adds.

Mdm Leow is on follow-up treatment with SGH’s Gynaecology and Urology departments and in spite of her ill-health, still cooks for her son and even bathes him; and at night, ensures that he has his oxygen mask on to help him breathe while he sleeps.

Although she fears mostly for her son’s health, she also worries a lot about the cost of his treatment. Formerly a cashier in a bakery, Mdm Leow had to give up her job so that she could care for Chee Heng. Her husband is, therefore, the sole breadwinner. Unfortunately, as he is a cancer survivor — he had Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma (NPC) eight years ago — Mdm Leow also worries for him, afraid that the stress might take a toll on his health.

Taking care of her son, worrying about him and the cost of his treatment as well as worrying for her husband’s health have all caused her own health to deteriorate so much so that Mdm Leow had, on a couple of occasions, been warded at SGH because of stress and pressure.

Fortunately, Mdm Leow has strong family support which allows her to take a breather occasionally; when there is someone to help take care of Chee Heng, she can either go out for a little while or just rest at home. Although her needs are few, they still come last because for now, Mdm Leow’s priority is her son. She just wants him to recover.

Mdm Leow Yuh Eng



*She Just Wants Her
Son to Recover*

Few take their marriage vows seriously, but none more than Sharon Tay Siew Kee. “Paul was my anchor and soul-mate. When we entered into marriage, we entered into a relationship of love and commitment — a relationship that promises to care, share, help, comfort and cherish one another,” declares Sharon, who was married to Paul Tye for the past ten-and-a-half years.

The first five years of their marriage was sheer bliss; the second five, as Sharon describes it was “when we travelled the journey together.” The journey she refers to began in December 2004 when Paul was diagnosed with Stage 2 Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma or NPC for short. But it was the recurrence three-and-a-half years later that truly tested their marriage vows because when the cancer returned, it returned with a vengeance.

Initially, Paul coped fairly well, but when the disease progressed aggressively to a stage when he could not sit nor stand for a minute without experiencing excruciating pain and his health deteriorated, Sharon took three months break from her work as a senior financial consultant to take on the role of full-time caregiver. Although they had a maid then, Sharon chose to care for Paul personally. Even when he was hospitalized, she would see to his every need. She was by his side from 8am to 10pm each day so that she was the first person he saw when he woke up and the last before he went to sleep. “When you love someone, you want to spend every waking moment with him,” professes Sharon.

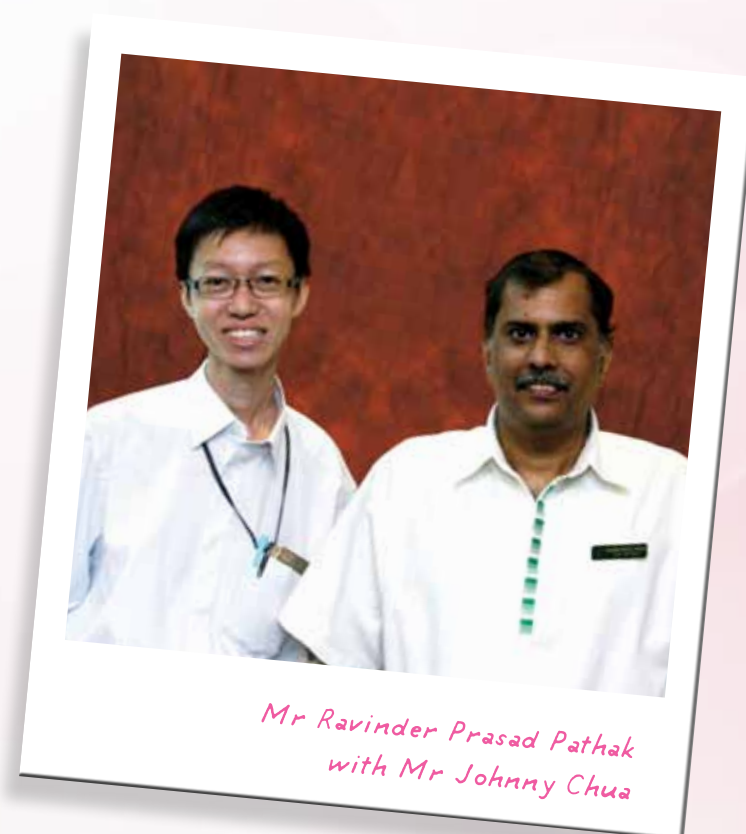
Though Sharon had the support of loving family members, church friends, pastors, colleagues and medical professionals, “We both loved each other deeply and it was this love and passion that spurred me to give him my all. It is only natural that I give him my full attention, to nurse and support him when he needs it and to keep him as comfortable as possible,” explains Sharon, who went on to share what ‘PAUL’ means to her: “‘P’ for the promise of togetherness; ‘A’ for being always caring and trusting; ‘U’ for you are and will always be; and ‘L’ the love of my life.”



Ms Sharon Tay Siew Kee

*For Better or for Worse,
in Sickness and in Health*

A Case of Brotherly Love



49-year-old Ravinder Prasad Pathak has been taking care of his 75-year-old step brother for more than 20 years. His brother, Kalika, has a heart condition — only about 20% of his heart is functioning — is mentally dull, cannot see and cannot walk properly even with the aid of a walking frame.

Where most caregivers would contemplate putting a highly-dependent patient such as Kalika in a nursing home, the thought never once crossed Ravinder's mind. "He does it out of love and compassion for his brother," says MSWA Johnny Chua. "He never complains and never begrudges his brother, but instead rallies the entire family to help take care of Kalika," adds Johnny.

Caring for someone like Kalika is mentally and physically challenging. It can also be financially draining. That is why Johnny has been helping Ravinder with the sourcing of financial assistance. But he is mostly afraid for Ravinder because "I'm afraid that he might burn out," says Johnny because taking care of someone 24/7 can do that to you! But fear not because Ravinder has his ways of relieving stress. "I do yoga regularly and I take long walks," shares Ravinder.

Ravinder is very dedicated when it comes to his brother's well-being. "He serves with a sincere heart and humility," observes Johnny. He has also opted for permanent afternoon shift so that he can be with his brother in the mornings when the rest of his family is either off to work or off to school. And, refusing to allow his brother to 'waste away' in a wheelchair, he has been working very hard towards getting his brother to walk. "We try to make him as independent as possible," says Ravinder. His efforts have paid off because now, his brother can at least walk a little with the aid of a walking frame.

So why does he do it when the others didn't? "I see it as my moral obligation," explains Ravinder. "I guess partly also it is the uniform that I wear that keeps me going." As a staff of SGH, Ravinder feels that if he can assist other patients with the 5Cs, what more if the patient is a sibling. Definitely a case of brotherly love, don't you think!

Their marriage was match-made, but it was a marriage made in Heaven. In Salim, Sarah B Binte Abdul Rasid found true love. Like all married couples, they had their fair share of ups and downs but they have always come out the better. "It was not easy, but we always managed," says Sarah, simply because they had each other. But, with the recent demise of her husband of 18 years, Sarah now feels so alone and empty inside.

When Salim was ill — he was diagnosed with a heart condition a couple of years back after he suddenly collapsed and his heart stopped — "Sarah took very good care of her husband," says Kerk Ka Lee, Manager, Heart & Lung Transplant, NHCS. "She knew all his medications better than he knew them himself," adds Kerk.

Whenever he was warded, Sarah would be with him from morning till night, her only break — to go home to cook lunch for the children when they returned home from school in the afternoon — and when he was back at home, she would cook the healthier versions of all his favourite foods.

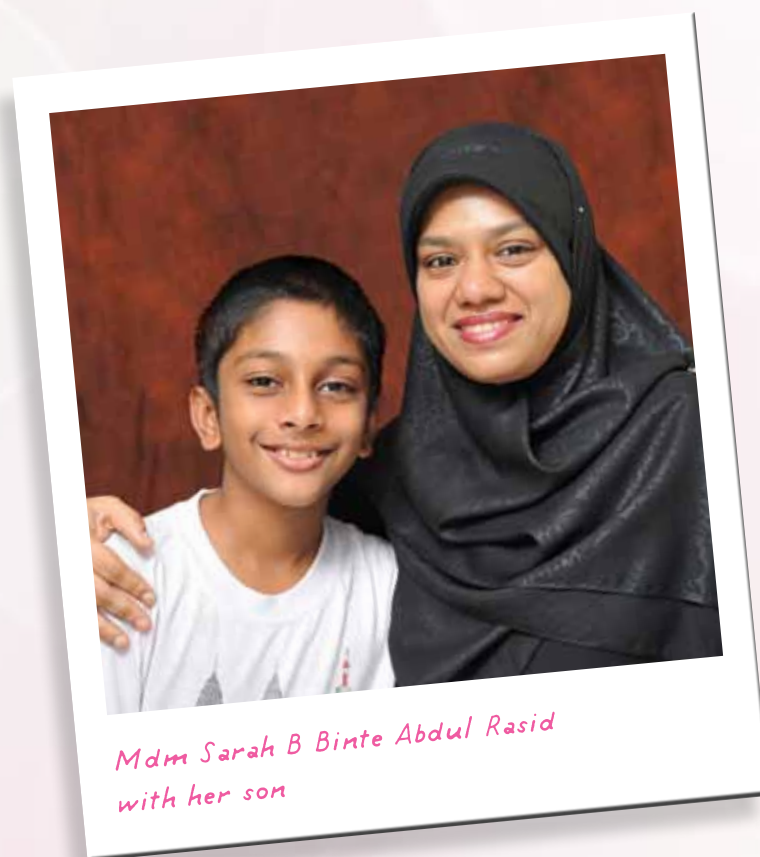
When he was fitted with the device, Sarah learnt all about it, how to do the dressing, how to take care of the exit site, etc. and she also learnt how to administer intravenous antibiotics. Certainly not for the squeamish!

When Salim received a call that a donor heart was available, everyone was happy but they also noticed something about Salim — he was acting a little differently. "He seemed to know he was not going to make it," says Sarah, recalling how her husband 'prepared' her just before he went in for surgery. He never made it out.

Sarah recalls how when Salim was alive, they would both make it a point to visit fellow patients to provide psychological support to the families of newly diagnosed patients and for Sarah to share with them her experiences as a caregiver.

Now that Salim is gone, "I don't eat and I hardly talk to people," admits Sarah. "Salim used to talk to me everyday and now suddenly, he's gone. It's very difficult for me," confesses Sarah who feels incomplete without the love of her life.

*He Was My First Love,
He Is My Last*





Mdm Fong Kam Ngoh

❧

Long-Distance Relationship

❧

Mdm Fong Kam Ngoh is willing to travel the distance if it will make her son better. Her only child, Goh Wee Kiang is 23, and has had an eye condition since he was 13. He suffers from glaucoma and has had multiple operations to his cornea.

It started with an ulcer in the eye that got infected, but according to Mdm Fong, it was a botched prescription by a Malaysian doctor that almost cost Wee Kiang his eyesight. Fortunately, she and her son decided to switch to a doctor in Singapore before it became too late. That was 10 years ago.

Since then, Wee Kiang has had three eye operations to save his eyes, none without their risks of course, but Mdm Fong was particularly worried about Wee Kiang's second operation which the doctors said could either restore 50% of his eyesight or none at all.

Today, Wee Kiang has full vision in his left eye and partial vision in his right. Where initially, they had to travel the distance from his home in JB once every week, now as his condition stabilized, he needs only to come down for his medical check-ups and to collect his medication about once every three to six months.

As they live somewhere near Kota Tinggi, traveling all the way to SNEC can be rather tedious, but Mdm Fong never complains. Their journey begins with a walk out to the main road from where they will take the bus that would take them directly to the checkpoint. If they are lucky and there is no traffic jam, that journey will take about 45 minutes. After they clear customs and cross over, it is more traveling, this time by bus and train. It is easily a half-day affair each time, traveling from home to the clinic in Singapore and then back home again.

According to EN Xiu Xiang of SingLasik at SNEC, "Rain or shine, she will accompany Wee Kiang for all his appointments and although she is not highly educated, she will listen attentively to whatever the doctor has to say."

This may be a long-distance relationship, but it is one Mdm Fong would willingly make sacrifices for as long as her son gets well.



Every four months, Mdm Ann Nah Miow Sim visits the Pasir Ris polyclinic with her mother for their regular check-ups; she, for her diabetes and hypertension, and her mother, for high blood pressure.

About eight years ago, Ann's mother came to live with her and her husband. Instead of leaving her to be cared for by strangers at a home, Ann and her husband, together with her brother and sister, unanimously agreed that their mother should have a home environment. "My mother brought me up so I see it as my duty now to take care of her," says Ann.

Taking care of an elderly person is not easy, not when she is wheelchair-bound and suffers from dementia with a host of chronic conditions. Yet Ann remains in high spirits. "Most important is to be with her," says Ann. That is why, besides sitting with her and talking with her, Ann would sometimes also show her mother old photographs to help her recall the past.

Although her mother is extremely nice and easy to care for, there are days when Ann feels the strain and stress. "Sometimes I feel like I'm tied down, but my brother and sister are very cooperative and supportive," says Ann.

As if taking care of an elderly person is not tough enough! A few years back, in 2007, Ann's husband was diagnosed with colon cancer and a couple of years later, had to undergo a liver operation. He, too, had to be cared for at home. Sadly, he succumbed to his illness in August 2010. He was 72 years old.

"There were times when I did feel a little stressed especially during the time when I had to take care of both my husband and my mother," admits Ann but she has her outlets. To relieve stress, Ann sews — "I like to do things with my hands" — and does line dancing; and for some quiet time, goes to church.

"Ann impressed me with her spirit," says Dr Tan Ngiap Chuan, Director of SingHealth's Polyclinic in Pasir Ris. "She is an amazing woman and an admirable wife and daughter who put all her energy into ensuring that both her mother and husband live comfortably," adds Dr Tan.

A Woman of High Spirits



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