

# SINGAPORE HEALTH INSPIRATIONAL PATIENT & CAREGIVER AWARD 2013



*Working Together Towards  
Better Integrated Care*

This celebration to honor exemplary and inspirational patients and caregivers is brought to you by SingHealth

# Our Inspirational Patients

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PROF IVY NG

## Foreword

For the third year running, outstanding patients and caregivers will be honoured with the Singapore Health Inspirational Patient and Caregiver Award, in recognition of their exemplary qualities of courage, strength and resilience, as well as a zest for life that all of us can learn from.

In healthcare, we often hear about acts of personal sacrifice and heroism; how when faced with healthcare challenges, ordinary folks are able to overcome these hurdles with healthy and positive attitudes and create an impact that is truly extraordinary.

Indeed, the mark of quality healthcare is not just how well we do in the day-to-day running of hospital operations and being at the forefront with the introduction of innovative technologies and new treatment modalities. It is also about how well we engage our patients and their families with genuine care, professionalism and empathy.

This award aptly raises awareness of how the best healthcare outcomes can be achieved when patients, caregivers and family members work together with healthcare professionals to facilitate their healthcare journeys. And certainly, delivering the best patient care for our patients is a collective effort by all institutions – acute hospitals, specialty centres, polyclinics, community hospitals and nursing homes. I am pleased to welcome the participation of Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital, Ren Ci Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital. The support given by our partners reflects a shared commitment to deliver a patient-centric and seamless healthcare service which our patients deserve.

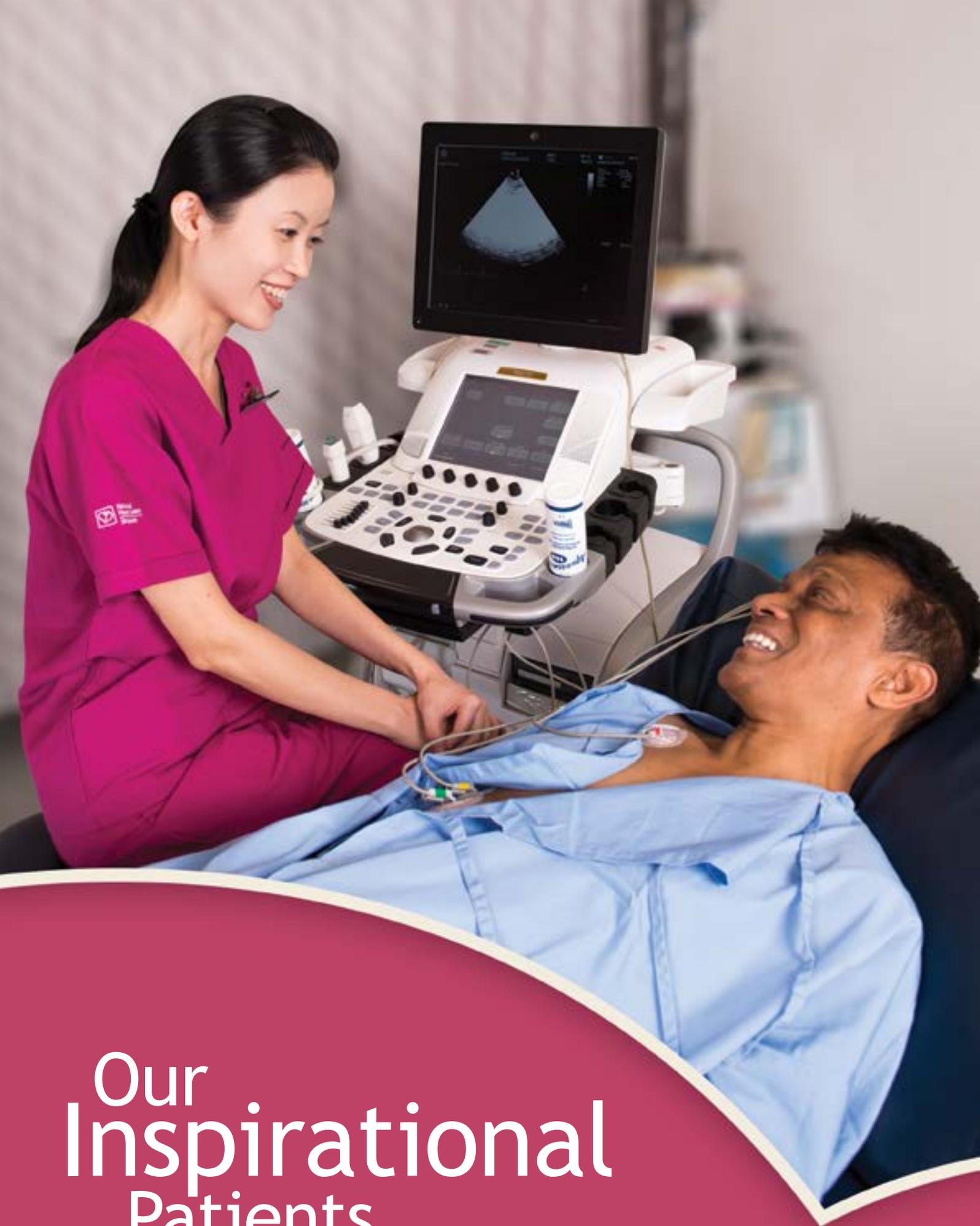
This year, we are proud to present 43 patients and caregivers with the award. This book, a compilation of their personal stories, captures the moving tales of how they have each found peace, strength, purpose and meaning amid extreme adversities. Our winners have inspired and motivated us to continue to deliver excellent care for our patients. We hope that you too, will enjoy and be inspired when you read their stories.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ivy Ng', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Prof Ivy Ng

Group Chief Executive Officer  
SingHealth



# Our Inspirational Patients

She always had sensitive skin, suffering from various skin allergies since young. So when Caline Chua, 41, felt frequent itches around her nipples, she thought little of it. It was only when she started to bleed that she decided to seek medical treatment.

She braced herself for the worst. After all, she has seen enough cancer cases to know that cancer can strike anyone at any time.

Although she was prepared for the news – Caline who was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer in October 2008 – remained apprehensive about the treatment. “My friend who had cancer suffered so much when she went through treatment and I wasn’t sure if I could handle it,” confesses Caline. “Thankfully, the treatment wasn’t as bad as I had expected,” she says.

Caline was given the ‘all clear’ sign in mid-2010 and by then she was already a volunteer member of the KK Alpine Blossoms Breast Cancer Support Group. “Caline was quick to volunteer. She is willing to devote her time even though she works full time,” says Senior Nurse Clinician (SNC) Teresa Ng Ruey Pyng from the KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital’s Breast Centre Department. “I believe sharing my story with the newly-diagnosed gives them hope. I always tell them that if I can do it, you can too,” adds Caline.

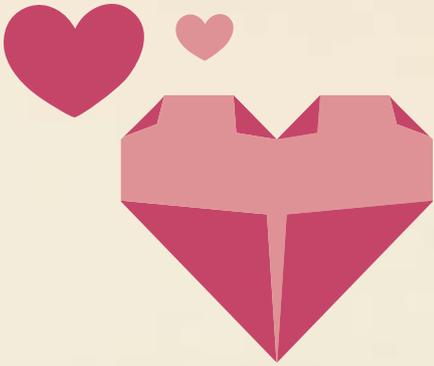
As a ‘certified’ Blossom Buddy, Caline not only shares her personal cancer battle with other patients but also how it has changed her life. Today, Caline is much more positive, patient and tries to lead a healthier lifestyle by exercising and maintaining a healthy diet. Even though she still works full-time as an insurance advisor, she has learned to balance her time between work, family and friends. She also makes it a point to set aside some personal time to travel - her favourite pastime. Unlike her friend who passed away recently without having the opportunity to visit her favourite place in the world, Caline intends to travel to as many places as she can, while she can, because she feels you shouldn’t put off what you can do today!

*NO MORE PUTTING OFF  
WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY*

***Ms Caline Chua Lee Ling***



*Caline with SNC Teresa Ng Ruey Pyng*



## *TOUCHING LIVES AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE*

### **Mr Kenrick Seah Gui Dong**

Young, brave, compassionate, cheerful and optimistic – these are just a few words to describe 13-year-old Kenrick Seah who was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in August 2011.

He may be just a young lad, but he is fully aware of the issues surrounding his illness and the treatment required so he willingly complies and cooperates with all his doctors, nurses and allied health workers. “Kenrick is such a brave kid. There is never a word of complaint despite having to endure the side effects of chemotherapy,” says his mother, Mdm Lea Kim Chaw.

Notwithstanding the challenges of an intensive therapy, Kenrick also insists on keeping up-to-date with his studies, grabbing every opportunity to study when he can.

Always thoughtful, Kenrick understands how physically and emotionally draining it can be to have to care for a sick child. That is why he tries to take charge of his own condition to relieve his mother as much as possible so that she can focus more on taking care of the family and not just him alone.

“For instance, when he is hospitalised and if there are procedures that need to be done in the middle of the night, he would inform the nurses in advance to wake him up, not his mother, so that she can have more rest,” says Staff Nurse (SN) Lim Yan Yin of Ward 75, KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH).

Being a patient himself, Kenrick also knows how depressing it can be to be sick and hospitalised so he tries to bring cheer wherever he goes. “He is always there to comfort the younger patients and he is very good at distracting them while the nurses draw their blood,” explains SN Lim. He has even turned his ward into a games room where the kids can play board and card games to take their minds off their illness.

Like all kids, Kenrick harbours a dream. He hopes to become a chef one day. “I like to eat and was planning to learn to cook from my mother during the school holidays but I have to put my plans on hold for the moment,” says Kenrick who had to go through a year of chemotherapy and missed much of the year-end school holidays.

His plans to become a chef may have to take a back seat but to Kenrick, this is just a temporary setback. Meanwhile he has his heart set on starting secondary school in April 2013.

It is this positive attitude, cheerful personality and a sense of compassion that makes Kenrick special. “Kenrick has definitely brought much joy to the people around him, especially to the other patients,” says SN Lim.

Everyone goes through pain and hardship. Yet when faced with such adversity, few display the courage, maturity and independence that 17-year-old Mohamed Baasha S/O Mohamed Yasin did. His positive attitude was what inspired the nurses at Ward 75, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

Baasha was only 15 years old when he was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a muscle debilitating cancer.

For someone active in sports who worked really hard to maintain his six-pack abs, it was difficult for Baasha to see the gradual weakening of his body. But Baasha was not one to wallow in self pity. "He was a fighter," says Baasha's father. "The only times he was depressed was when he was first diagnosed and when he had to spend the recent Hari Raya in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)," he adds. But that was only because Baasha was so looking forward to spending it with his family at home after being in KKH for most of the last two years.

Quickly putting the sadness behind him, Baasha organised a party to thank the nurses of Ward 75. They became his surrogate family during his stay at the hospital as both his parents could not spend much time with him due to work and family commitments – they have two other children to care for, the youngest being only four years old.

At the hospital, Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) Noor Faezah Mohamed Yusoff and Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) Rafikah Sawal as well as Senior Enrolled Nurse (SEN) Nursyahidah Muhammed Rosli Ismail were particularly close to him. They were like the sisters he never had, with whom he would share his innermost thoughts and dreams. "He often spoke about his ambition to become a pilot," confides SEN Syahidah.

The nurses were touched by his thoughtfulness and compassion in helping others. "Baasha was always so cheerful and encouraging and showed great concern for the other patients especially those newly diagnosed because he wanted to put them at ease," says SSN Faezah.

Despite intensive rounds of treatment, Baasha suffered a relapse in July 2011. Even to his last days, his thoughts were on others – he insisted on finishing the interview for this story with the hope that it will serve to inspire others to stay strong. Baasha succumbed to his illness on 22 November 2012.

"Baasha has inspired many of us healthcare workers," says SSN Rafikah. "He has shown us that even with a bad prognosis, life should be lived to the fullest. For someone so young, Baasha has shown great maturity and independence," adds SSN Rafikah proudly.

## *BAASHA, OUR BRAVE FIGHTER*

***(Late) Mr Mohamed Baasha S/O Mohamed Yasin***





## *BACK TO NORMAL EVERYDAY LIVING*

### ***Ms Cheong Lee Meng***

She was 32 years old when she was diagnosed with rectal cancer. It came as a shock to Cheong Lee Meng, now 63, because she was relatively fit and did not have a family history of cancer.

The treatment plan for her was surgery, an abdomino-perineal resection with permanent colostomy. It sounded complicated and Lee Meng was apprehensive. Fortunately she was introduced to fellow cancer patient, Roy who had undergone the same surgery and was living a normal life. “Roy gave me the confidence to proceed with the surgery,” says Lee Meng.

Two years after her surgery, Lee Meng bravely put on a swimsuit for a national TV programme to help raise awareness of colorectal cancer. She drove home the point that even a colorectal cancer patient with a colostomy bag such as herself could lead a normal life.

“This entire episode has taught me that there is absolutely nothing you cannot do as long as you have the right mentality and attitude,” says Lee Meng. “Adjusting to my new life and getting back to normal everyday living was relatively easy for me thanks to Roy who introduced me to the colostomy bags and accessories I needed.” Besides Roy, Lee Meng also credits her second chance at life to the team of doctors and nurses, her faith and especially her young daughter. Lee Meng remembers telling her doctor, “I cannot die, I will not die. I have too much to lose because my daughter’s only two!”

Now that she has been given a new lease of life, “I have become more grateful and appreciative of things. Previously, I was a true workaholic,” admits Lee Meng. “I’ve learned to manage my stress and realise that there is more to life than just work. I’ve also learned not to fret over trivial issues and try to see the glass as half full rather than half empty” shares Lee Meng.

“Ms Cheong is one of the most courageous female colorectal cancer survivors I have ever seen,” says Carol Loi, Genetic Counsellor from the Department of Colorectal Surgery at Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

“On a personal level, Ms Cheong has helped me to better understand colorectal cancer patients’ experience, their issues and their journey. It is people like her who inspired me to do something more meaningful for cancer survivors. She is one of the reasons why I am pursuing a PhD in Nursing Studies, with the aim to improve the quality of life for my patients,” says Carol.

As a patient ambassador, Lee Meng regularly visits patients before or after their surgery to encourage, comfort and assure them that they can recover and get back to everyday living. She also shares her recovery journey at cancer awareness public forums and encourages the audience to go for regular health screening and seek medical attention early. This is her way of paying it forward. After all, she received much help when she was a patient herself. “Help and support each other. That’s the best way to get you back to normal everyday living,” she says.

Mdm Leong Wah Kin is single, feisty and extremely independent.

“I am very proud that I am still able to work,” says the 76 years old lady who earns \$18 a day as a cleaner at a fast food restaurant. “I am happiest when I am working,” says Wah Kin who suffered a stroke in 2002. The stroke kept her out of action for at least a month, during which she offered to pay her sibling’s maid \$1,000 to help her for a month because she couldn’t bear to have to depend on anyone or to owe anyone any favours.

Determined to get well, Wah Kin who lives alone in a rental flat in Tiong Bahru, got on with her daily exercise routines which included climbing 12 flights of stairs, three times a day for two years. Wah Kin looked forward to going back to work. “Work was always on my mind,” she says. When she felt well enough, she went back to work at the airport, this time as a dishwasher where she worked till she was 70 years old and had to leave.

Still insisting that she would continue working, Wah Kin sought employment as a cleaner and to this day continues working. “Failure is never on my mind,” says Wah Kin, “and I am always looking forward.”

Wah Kin is positive and generous. Even though she is 76 years old and suffering the effects of the stroke that led to a few falls last year, Wah Kin still tries her best to support herself with some financial assistance. Despite her relatively hard life, she is generous and looks out for neighbours like her who are old and single. She cooks for a neighbour regularly and accompanies another neighbour for all her medical appointments.

“Life is hard for her because she needs to support herself despite her disability,” says Nurse Clinician (NC) Irene Tan Cheng Gaik of Ward 64C, Singapore General Hospital (SGH), “yet she looks beyond herself and shows such great concern to people around her with her generosity, loving and positive attitude.”

*INDEPENDENT AND PROUD OF IT*

***Mdm Leong Wah Kin***





## *A FULL AND FULFILLING LIFE*

### **Mr Pay Gang Yi, Wilson**

In August 2008, Pay Gang Yi, Wilson, 33, was diagnosed with colorectal cancer when a CT scan revealed that he had a tumour lodged between his colon and his bladder. “I was told that it was the size of a little durian,” says Wilson. Wilson underwent surgery and had to use a stoma bag for eight months before his stoma was closed in April 2009.

“On the whole, I think I coped quite well even though I was rushed to the hospital several times due to infections and side effects from chemotherapy,” says Wilson.

Wilson remembers once being warded next to a man dying from lung cancer. “I am not a religious person but since getting cancer I have become more spiritual,” says Wilson, “so I chanted for the man who had difficulty breathing and was moaning and groaning in pain. His wife was crying and screaming for him.”

Kind-hearted and generous, it was no surprise that after he recovered, Wilson took on the role of patient ambassador to share his experience with the other patients. “I get motivated when I see them go back to their normal life,” says Wilson.

Besides volunteering his time at the hospital, Wilson also helps out at the Singapore Soka Association. He is actively involved in the St John Ambulance Brigade activities, something he has been doing since his school days.

He may be an engineer by profession but he has a passion for teaching. “I have been giving tuition since my army days and before my cancer I had eight students,” says Wilson who continued to teach two of his students while undergoing treatment. Today, Wilson is fulfilling his dream of setting up his own tuition centre and is in the midst of finalising the paper work.

“It’s amazing that despite his busy schedule, Wilson manages to find time for himself. He works out at the gym at least twice a week and swims and jogs regularly. He also loves travelling,” says Senior Nurse Clinician (SNC) Tay Ai Choo of Nurse Clinician Specialty Care (NCSC) at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH), “He takes up these interests because he believes that he needs to be healthy in mind, body and soul,” she adds.

“He is a very good role model especially to young patients suffering from colorectal cancer,” says Senior Nurse Clinician (SNC) Ong Choo Eng also of NCSC at SGH.

Ravinder Singh was 48 years old when he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in April 2006. “Many might slide into depression when diagnosed with such a disease, but Ravinder chose to come to terms with his medical condition with an open mind and proactively took steps to ensure a swift recovery,” says Senior Staff Nurse (SN) Kaliani Letchumanan of the Haematology Centre at Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

Ravinder approached his illness the same way he approached any problem. He worked closely with his doctor whom he had complete trust in. He also realised that one of the main causes for his illness was probably unusual and excessive stress and he was determined to address that.

“I realised that I was under too much stress at work, so for me to get well, I knew I had to stay home and recuperate,” says Ravinder, a retired lawyer. “My family played a pivotal role in my recovery, as did my friends, several of whom flew in from different parts of the world to spend time with me,” adds Ravinder appreciatively. He also did more of what he loved like painting because he believed that all the negativity associated with his illness could be combated by adopting a positive mind.

“When he was told of the possible side effects of his treatment, Ravinder discarded all pessimistic thoughts and kept his focus on achieving a positive outcome,” says SSN Kaliani.

Ravinder was put on thalidomide and showed good progress after just one month. In the next round of chemotherapy, he was warned of the possible severe side effects. “The doctor told me, ‘Ravinder, you will throw up, get ulcers and you will lose at least 10kg,’ but I refused to accept it. Instead I said, ‘I will not be sick, neither will I look sick because I have four children and the last two are very young so I don’t want them to see their father sick,’” insists Ravinder. Holding on to such positive thoughts worked for Ravinder because he suffered none of the side effects!

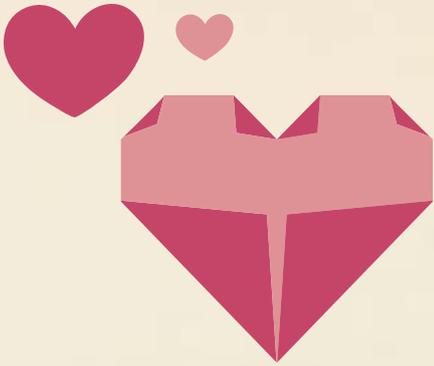
“I’ve been in nursing for almost 25 years and I’ve never been so amazed by a patient’s steadfastness, as I have been of Ravinder. He took responsibility to strengthen his mind and body by adhering to a strict diet and exercise regime as well as relying on spiritualism to enhance and quicken his recovery process,” says SSN Kaliani.

On the invitation of SGH staff, Ravinder gives regular talks on myeloma especially to patients who are preparing for transplants. Ravinder also tries to spread his philosophy that one can fight any illness with a strong mind and a positive attitude.

## *MIND OVER MATTER*

***Mr Ravinder Singh***





## *FOCUSING ON WHAT IS IMPORTANT*

### **Mr Shiv**

Shiv, 59, was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in March 2006. He underwent surgery and had to wear a permanent stoma bag. “Everything happened so fast that I didn’t have time to think about having to live with the bag for the rest of my life,” says Shiv. “Reality only set in when I went home and had to clean the bag myself!”

The effects of chemotherapy and the fact that he had to live with a stoma bag drove Shiv into depression even though he had strong family support. “I slept alone and I cried every night,” admits Shiv. “I felt like ending it all but my daughter was only 11 years old then and I kept going because of her.”

Shiv remembers a traumatic experience where he made a mess at the office because of a violent bout of diarrhoea, a side effect of the chemotherapy treatment. To this day, that memory still brings shivers up his spine.

“After my surgery I was invited to attend the Singapore Cancer Society (SCS) support group meetings but I was not in the mood to talk to anyone because I felt so ashamed,” says Shiv. A meeting with Singapore General Hospital’s patient ambassador, Joey Kong during a talk changed his attitude altogether. “I was inspired by Joey’s sharing and that was when I decided to take a more positive stance,” says Shiv gratefully. With Joey’s encouragement, Shiv started attending the patient support group at SGH.

Together with Joey and Michael Lee, then Chairman of the support group, Shiv also started visiting patients in the wards at SGH every Thursday. “Visiting patients, giving them support and sharing my experience with them helped me too,” says Shiv.

Besides spending time with patients, Shiv also plays an active role in helping to recruit patient ambassadors for the Colorectal Surgery Recovery (CSR) Programme.

“Shiv is very committed as a patient ambassador in the colorectal cancer support group,” says Senior Nurse Clinician (SNC) Ong Choo Eng of Nurse Clinician Specialty Care (NCSC) at SGH. “He also often receives requests from private doctors to visit patients from other hospitals and he happily obliges.”

Seeing that there are so many colorectal patients who need support has inspired Shiv to look into setting up an Ostomy Association in Singapore so that patients regardless of which hospital they are from, can benefit from it. “We hope with greater outreach, more patients can benefit,” says Shiv.

Chong Ah Huat, 48, has a chronic wound that requires regular dressing three times a week at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS). It started with a cancerous mass on the right side of his face a few years ago and it has since spread.

Formerly a goldsmith, Ah Huat was in his prime when he was struck by this disease. Handsome and well-built, the disease has left him not only weak and frail but also disfigured and blind in one eye. He can hardly walk on his own and can only be fed through a percutaneous endoscope gastrostomy (PEG) tube. Because of his illness, Ah Huat has practically no social life now – besides the visits to NCCS, he is confined to home most of the time. Despite the pain and sufferings, Ah Huat remains positive and is determined to win his battle against cancer even though the treatment alone is an arduous task.

Redressing the open wound on his head takes at least an hour. Staff Nurse (SN) Looi Woan Tyng from the Nurse Clinician Department of NCCS has to gently clean the wound first before patiently applying layers and layers of dressing over it. “Sometimes I also take the opportunity to shave him and shampoo his hair,” says SN Looi. By the time she is done, Ah Huat looks like he is wearing a heavy turban, one that looks too heavy for his frail body. But he endures it all in silence, determined to get through it.

Unfortunately, rounds of chemotherapy and radiotherapy failed to overcome the disease. Today, there is no more active treatment available for Ah Huat. Still, he remains optimistic and has never thought of giving up. “Mr Chong is strong-willed and I admire him for his bravery and his fighting spirit,” says SN Looi.

*HE WILL FIGHT TO THE END*

***Mr Chong Ah Huat***





## *SINCERITY ALWAYS SHINES THROUGH*

### ***Ms Merle McIntyre***

Merle McIntyre, 57, did not realise joining The Revival Connection (TRC) would have such a huge impact on her and on her fellow patients. “Merle is one of the few cancer survivors with early diagnosis to join TRC,” says Dr Gilbert Fan, Head of Department of Psychosocial Oncology at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS). This is unusual as the support group mainly comprises patients with advanced and recurrent cancers. “I joined TRC because I wanted to learn how people with advanced and recurrent cancers lived,” explains Merle.

New to volunteerism, Merle derives great satisfaction from being able to help others. She underwent training and attended talks to prepare herself for the role of patient ambassador.

Merle can be seen at NCCS almost every week providing support to patients. “It is not easy to find patient ambassadors willing to work with patients who have second cancers,” says Dr Fan. “Being involved to the extent of visiting them at their homes or in the hospices like Merle does takes a lot of courage and commitment,” he adds.

Of course it can get quite depressing and does affect Merle at times. “I get particularly affected by patients who seem to be doing well but suddenly take a turn for the worse,” says Merle. Fortunately, Merle is not the type to dwell on it. “When I am home, my focus turns to my family,” says the mother of four.

In her befriending work, Merle has brought joy and love to patients and their caregivers. “Merle is one of the most dedicated ambassadors that I have ever come across. She takes every opportunity to learn and despite her tight schedule, still makes time to volunteer at NCCS,” says Dr Fan, “and she does not just deal with patients, she also mentors the new patient ambassadors and helps them with on-the-job training,” he adds. “As a committee member, Merle is generous with her suggestions on how TRC could further help patients with advanced and recurrent cancers,” says Dr Fan.

Merle also helps out with other social and recreational activities and events and is always encouraging patients and caregivers to participate in the activities organised by NCCS.

Her commitment to volunteer is commendable but Merle remains humble about her contributions. “I’m just there to help in whatever way I can; most of the time, I just listen,” says the soft-spoken Merle.

“Sometimes you may feel that if you have no special skills, you are inadequate,” says Merle. “But I think if you are sincere, it goes a long way. Patients will sense your sincerity in wanting to help.”

She was a fashion designer with a thriving business built over the years. Fashion was her passion. But in 1997, she gave up that passion when she discovered that she had breast cancer.

Despite her illness, Jenny did not lose her keen sense of style. She makes every effort to dress up even on trips to the hospitals for her chemotherapy sessions. “Maybe that was why my doctors kept encouraging me to volunteer, because I didn’t look or act like a patient! They were hoping I could inspire other patients,” says Jenny.

Jenny eventually did sign up as a volunteer. “I couldn’t bear to see the patients so helpless,” says Jenny. “When I was first diagnosed, in addition to support from healthcare staff, I did my own research to have a better understanding of my condition. I thought it would be meaningful to share with other patients what I know about the condition,” she adds.

That was how she started as one of the National Cancer Centre Singapore’s pioneer batch of volunteers in 2000. Jenny has since forged close friendships with many fellow patients. “I often encourage patients to attend support group meetings and participate in the programmes organised by NCCS,” says Jenny who also organises regular outings such as karaoke sessions and potluck gatherings for her breast cancer patient friends. The average attendance at these monthly outings is about 30 persons. Jenny finds great satisfaction in extending her support, especially to the newly diagnosed patients who may find it hard to cope in the initial stages.

“Jenny is such a committed volunteer,” says Saryna Ong, Principal Medical Social Worker, Department of Psychosocial Oncology at NCCS. “She not only actively seeks out patients and bring them to the support group but also makes the effort to follow up especially with those who are not coping well with treatment,” adds Saryna. “She calls them regularly and offers them a listening ear and even visits them at home if needed.”

Besides NCCS, Jenny also volunteers at the Singapore General Hospital’s surgical ward to support patients who have undergone mastectomies. “I’m here at NCCS Clinic A every Monday and at SGH every Thursday,” says Jenny who also volunteers at the Breast Cancer Foundation once a month.

“I am personally touched by Jenny’s dedication. To be doing what she is doing without any tangible reward is truly inspiring not only to the patients but to the hospital staff as well,” says Saryna.

“Seeing the patients return to work and resuming their lives is my reward. You could say that I have traded one passion for another!” says Jenny.

## *TRADING ONE PASSION FOR ANOTHER*

***Ms Jenny Teo Bee Moy***





## *BETTER ME THAN YOU*

### ***Ms Haziqah Binte Idris***

When Haziqah was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma in April 2011, she took the news calmly. Her first thoughts were on her treatment plans and what she could do to battle the illness.

Haziqah did her own research to learn more about her illness but it was from speaking with other patients that she realised just how lucky she was. "Hodgkin's Lymphoma has a much higher survival rate compared to non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma," shares Haziqah.

The ever optimistic Haziqah was confident in getting her life back on track. In less than a year, Haziqah made a full recovery and was back to work. She also continued to pursue her degree in nursing at the Singapore Institute of Management University. Having gone through this health ordeal, Haziqah has learnt the value of effective time management because every minute counts.

Besides working full-time and studying, Haziqah also volunteers at the Tzu Chi Free Clinic (Redhill Branch). A keen blogger, she often shares her journey in the hope of inspiring others to be optimistic. "I believe sharing my experience can help others cope with their own illness," asserts Haziqah. "That is why I started the blog. It is not an official support group but anyone is free to call or Facebook me," she adds.

Indeed, this desire to help others in need was the very reason why she chose nursing as a career. Her colleagues and close friends at Ward 44 of the National Heart Centre Singapore (NHCS) are totally impressed with how she handled her illness where she has turned something negative into something so positive. "I've never met someone like her!" declares Staff Nurse (SN) Jasmine Tan Jia Xing. "Even while she was undergoing chemotherapy, she was observing how the nurses did their work. The level of care and patience the staff at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) extended to their patients inspired Haziqah - she was determined to be as good as them once she recovered," shares SN Tan.

Staff Nurse (SN) Mya Sandar Hlaing feels the same way. "I tried to imagine myself in her shoes, and I don't think I would cope as well," admits SN Hlaing.

Seeing her face this obstacle with such strength and courage definitely helped her family and friends cope better as well. It set their minds at ease to see her so positive. The fact that she said 'better me than you' to her mum when she was diagnosed showed just how brave and selfless this young lady is while her optimism and determination to get well taught them to not dwell on the problem but to overcome it with courage and faith.

Bridget Ang had just completed her 'O' Levels when she experienced a violent bout of vomiting. Doctors revealed that she had a condition known as Arteriovenous malformation (AVM) which means the blood vessels in her brain could rupture at any time and this could be fatal. Though her condition was put under control, doctors warned that there is always the possibility that it could happen again.

True enough, it recurred in 2006, and again in 2011. Thankfully, Bridget who is now 47, got through both times. It is not easy to have to live your life with such perilous uncertainty but religion keeps Bridget strong.

Since embracing Buddhism in 2004, Bridget has become more philosophical. She doesn't worry about things that are beyond her control anymore and her life is much simpler. "Buddhism changed me completely. It has changed my perspective on life," she says.

"At work, I do what I can," says Bridget who used to be a nurse but now works part-time as an I-Care Officer with NTUC Eldercare. An active volunteer, Bridget conducts an average of two home visits a day where she helps the elderly with some of their basic needs such as bathing and dressing their wounds. Often, she even goes a step further to help them with their household chores like cooking and cleaning.

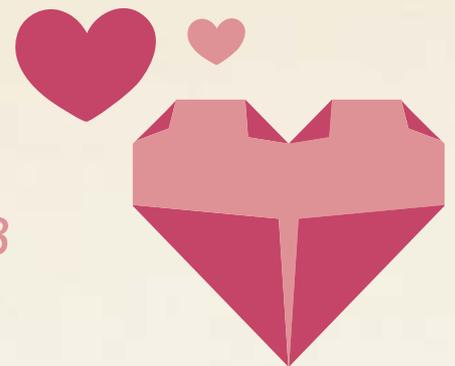
A devout Buddhist, Bridget spends an hour at the temple everyday - to chant for all the people she knows, especially the sick. "I do it because I find it soothing and calming but mostly because I feel that I am doing them some good."

Despite this health setback, Bridget has never once felt like her life has been short-changed. "I continued to pursue my interest in nursing for 23 years and now I still get to contribute to society by volunteering," says Bridget.

"It is not easy to endure such a chronic condition. Yet Bridget is able to remain positive and is even happy to help others," says Nurse Clinician (NC) Lee Kah Keow of National Neuroscience Institute's Neurosurgery Department. "It is this positive attitude of hers that I try to remember whenever I encounter problems in the course of my work or in my personal life."

## *LIVING WITH A TICKING TIME BOMB*

***Ms Bridget Ang***





## *WILLPOWER CONQUERS ALL*

### ***Mdm Sumathi***

Sumathi had just returned from an overseas business trip and felt giddy while walking.

At a colleague's home that evening, she suddenly found herself not being able to move the right side of her body. Sumathi had suffered a stroke.

Although Sumathi went through successful surgery to remove the blood clot in her brain, the road to recovery was a long drawn process.

A determined lady, Sumathi promised the doctors that she would walk out of the hospital in a month. She immediately set out to work on her recovery. "What I did was to will my arms and legs to move," says Sumathi. "It may sound silly and maybe even a little crazy but I would actually tell my hand, 'Come on hand, pick up that pen and write. You are Sumathi, you can do it!'" - not unlike the orders she used to give during her 27 years with the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF).

On the 30th day, Sumathi really did walk out of the hospital completely unaided. Such is her determination and willpower.

It is this same determination that motivated Nurse Clinician (NC) Lee Kah Keow of National Neuroscience Institute's Department of Neurosurgery to start the Neurovascular Befriender Service. "When Sumathi was admitted, she asked me if there was a support group she could learn from to help with her recovery," relates NC Lee. Sumathi was appalled to learn that there wasn't one and insisted on forming one herself. "True to her word, after her surgery, Sumathi approached me again and together with a few other patients, we started the support group," recalls NC Lee.

Starting the support group left NC Lee completely humbled. "I thought, as a specialist nurse, I knew everything I needed to know to guide my patients through their recovery. But I soon learned from Sumathi that despite what I had shared with her, it was merely a specialist's point of view, not a patient's. Sumathi made me realise that what patients appreciate are personal views from patients who have had a similar experience," says NC Lee.

Sumathi is very dedicated in supporting fellow patients in the support group. "When a patient is referred to her for support, Sumathi always makes the effort to come down to the hospital to visit the patient and even follows the patient through to the rehabilitation hospital," says NC Lee. "All I want is to talk to the patients and give them hope," explains Sumathi who believes that while there is life, there is hope.

“When I was younger, I used to wish that I was like a normal kid,” admits 18-year-old Ong Hui Xin who is visually impaired. “I now realise I am truly blessed with a good family and a great bunch of friends,” says the first year Arts student of the Millenia Institute.

The youngest in the family, Hui Xin lost her sight to retinoblastoma – a form of eye cancer – at a young age. When she was just about a month old, her mother suspected that there was something wrong with her eyes. It turned out she had a tumour in one eye and partial blockage in the other. At four months, Hui Xin underwent radiotherapy. When she turned nine, Hui Xin had surgery on her left eye. This was followed by another operation two years later, this time on her right eye.

Hui Xin attended the Special School for the Visually Handicapped and enrolled in a mainstream school subsequently for her tertiary education. At the time, there were only a few mainstream schools that accepted students with visual disabilities. Hui Xin chose to attend Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School which was located in Yishun even though she lived in Tampines. This meant that she had to spend about three hours a day commuting to school and back. But she did not mind.

Other than the fact that she is visually impaired, wears a prosthetic eye and walks with a cane, Hui Xin is just like any other teenager. “I had a tough time adjusting to my new school life,” admits Hui Xin. Fortunately, Hui Xin managed to make many good friends who helped her adjust and who remain close to her.

“At first some of my classmates were hesitant to talk to me because they weren’t exactly sure what to say. They were afraid that they might say something wrong and offend me,” recalls Hui Xin. “But I tried to allay their fears and put them at ease by joking and sharing my story with them,” says Hui Xin.

Though visually impaired, Hui Xin participates in co-curricular activities. She joined the St John’s Ambulance and played the saxophone in the school band.

“What I admire most about Hui Xin is her courage and tenacity when faced with challenges,” says Priscilla Lim, Medical Social Worker, Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC). “Despite her visual impairment, Hui Xin continues to live life to its fullest. We should all take a leaf out of her book and look on the positive side of things,” adds Priscilla

## *JUST ANOTHER TEENAGER*

*Ms Ong Hui Xin*



*Hui Xin with her mother, Mdm Toh Gea Kim*



## TAKING CONTROL OF MY LIFE

### **Mdm Ho Buay Geok**

She worked 12 hours a day, five days a week as a supervisor at a cleaning company. She was doing well in her career and clearly enjoyed it.

But eight years ago, Mdm Ho Buay Geok, now 55, was diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol. “It came as a shock to me because I am generally quite healthy. I’m not the type to fall sick easily,” claims Buay Geok, who decided to seek medical attention due to a long period of feeling fatigue.

“Buay Geok has managed her medical conditions well in spite of financial and social difficulties,” says Dr Hwang Siew Wai, Director of Bukit Merah Polyclinic.

Divorced more than a decade ago, all five of Buay Geok’s children chose to live with their father because they couldn’t bear to see her struggle financially just to raise them. “‘Mummy, we will always love you, you are our mother but we don’t want you to have to work all the time. What kind of a life would that be for you?’ That was what my eldest son said to me,” says Buay Geok. “He was only 14 years old at the time yet he showed such maturity,” she adds proudly. As fate would have it, two of her children have since ‘returned’ to her.

Following her diagnosis, Buay Geok now leads a more balanced life. She still works but incorporates exercise and a healthy diet into her lifestyle. “I never used to exercise; I don’t like it,” says Buay Geok who now includes brisk walking and low impact exercises into her weekly exercise routine. Weekends are also when she chills out and spends time with friends over lunch or karaoke sessions.

“My kids are my source of motivation,” claims Buay Geok, “especially my daughter who is living with me. She is always encouraging me and I am motivated to stay healthy so that I can take care of her because she is hearing impaired and has a congenital heart condition,” explains Buay Geok. “That is why I always remind myself, so what if you have a medical problem, it is your life, take control of it.”

Buay Geok also does not believe that just because she has multiple medical issues, she should look or act like a patient. “She may be a patient but you can hardly tell because each time she visits, she is so full of optimism. She does not dwell on her misfortune but instead brings so much cheer to me and the other patients,” says Dr Hwang. “She is truly an inspirational patient!”

Basheer Ahmad, 36, suffers from spastic paraparesis, a degenerative muscular disorder. “The first sign appeared about six years ago when my legs felt so heavy that I found it hard to climb the steps,” says Basheer, whose condition deteriorated to the point where he fell to the ground one day, about three years ago, after having lost all the strength in his legs.

Despite this life changing illness, Basheer remains optimistic and motivated. Even when he lost his job because he could no longer walk, he did not despair. Neither did he wallow in self-pity when he was plagued with sacral sores and Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) that landed him in hospital for five months.

“In life there will always be challenges, you’ve just got to find a way to get around them,” says Basheer philosophically. “When I’m faced with steps, they may block me but they cannot stop me. I just need to look for an alternative route. It may take a little longer but there is always a way,” explains Basheer.

Basheer’s optimism is evident in many ways. He is always full of energy and highly proactive. With two diplomas in Bio Technology and Strategic Marketing, Basheer is now working towards a third – a diploma in E-commerce at the Singapore Polytechnic. He intends to use his knowledge and experience to set up a ‘one-stop-shop’ selling nutritional supplements and wound-dressing materials as well as other medical supplies such as catheters and nasogastric tubes. “Currently, there isn’t a non-profit organisation in Singapore that offers such a service and from my own experience, I know how difficult it is to get everything you need without having to run all over the place or having to buy them in bulk,” says Basheer. Now that he has just got his driving licence, Basheer is even considering doing home delivery too!

Basheer may be wheelchair-bound but his life is certainly not limited by it. “There are no boundaries and the only limitations are the ones you place on yourself,” insists Basheer whose favourite pastimes include zipping along the park connector, taking in the fresh air and admiring the surrounding beauty, as well as travelling. “There is no place I can’t go,” says Basheer. He has even travelled overseas with his bunch of friends who are also wheelchair-bound and who like him believe that limitations are all in the mind.

## *WHEELCHAIR-BOUND AND FREE*

***Mr Basheer Ahmad s/o Mohamed Jaffar***





## BEATING THE ODDS

### **Mr Hazlan Bin Abas**

*Hazlan with his wife, Siti*

He was diagnosed with diabetes when he was serving National Service and a string of health setbacks ensued. He lost sight in his right eye in 2000, was put on dialysis in 2002, developed a heart condition in 2007, had his first amputation in 2009 and a second one the following year. Yet Hazlan Abas, 40, does not consider himself disabled because in his mind, there is nothing he cannot do.

But this self-confidence did not come easily at first. For Hazlan, the thought foremost on his mind was whether he could still provide for his family.

“As a man, you want to be able to provide for your family,” says Hazlan. “To me, that is most important.” With so many uncertainties ahead, Hazlan fell into depression when he felt that he could no longer provide for Siti, his wife of six years and his two adopted children. “But he snapped out of depression quite fast especially after we got to know others who were in a worse state,” says Siti, 33.

While his wife is at work, Hazlan handles all the household chores and does the marketing. “With my motorised wheelchair, I can go practically anywhere,” he says. “I can go to the market and I can wait for my wife at the bus-stop when she comes home late.” He also does all of the cleaning, the washing and the cooking. Hazlan who has just completed the Information Technology Assisted Programme (ITAP) offered by the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) to upgrade his computer skills is hoping that he can one day become an IT trainer.

“Honestly I have no reason not to be positive because I have the love and support of my family,” admits Hazlan. “And I have his,” declares Siti. “He may be handicapped but he completes me. He is truly my other half,” says Siti lovingly.

Hazlan who regularly attends Amputee Support Group meetings Organised by Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital (AMK-THKH) hopes that by sharing his experience with others, it will help inspire them to become independent and positive-minded like how he has learned to be. “Being negative does nothing for you, so why not make the best of what you are dealt with and accept who you are even if it means having to lower your expectations,” advises Hazlan. “After all, you cannot turn back the clock.”

“When I was first admitted to Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital (AMK-THKH), I couldn’t walk,” recalls Sara Ariffin, 50. “I had just suffered a mild stroke which left my entire left side limp.” It didn’t help that Sara had an earlier fall that resulted in a tear that affected her nerve.

But Sara, whose husband passed away seven years ago, was determined to get well quickly so that she could go back to supporting her mother who is 83 years old.

Although physically impaired, Sara remained positive and motivated. During her stay at the hospital, some of her optimism rubbed off on other patients as well. Though she does not speak any Chinese dialects, that did not hinder Sara’s attempts to spur some of her fellow patients on. She constantly encouraged them to follow her to do bedside exercises. Even patients who were generally withdrawn and moody began to cheer up!

“I also tried to encourage them to eat,” says Sara. “I always reminded them, ‘you must eat otherwise you won’t have the strength to do your exercises,’” adds Sara who also learned tai-chi during her stay at the hospital. Together with a fellow patient, they managed to round up all the other patients in her ward to do the morning tai-chi workouts together.

Rehabilitation has not always been a breeze for Sara though. “I remember once I almost broke down while doing the ‘dough-nut’ exercise at the gym,” reveals Sara, referring to one of the exercise stations in the gym which required her to hang ‘dough-nut’ rings onto pegs placed at different heights. But with sheer determination, Sara finally managed to overcome that hurdle. “Friends and family kept me positive,” says Sara. Her mother, sister Ajar and brother-in-law Ahmad Tarmizi were very supportive and helpful throughout this period. Doreen, the friend she got to know at the hospital and with whom she still keeps in touch, is another great source of support.

By the time Sara was discharged, she could walk with minimum assistance though she has to continue her rehabilitation at home and at the centre as an outpatient. Whenever she visits, she makes sure to seek out the nurses as well as the other patients to see how they have been.

Sara has even started to volunteer at the hospital. “I’m here every Saturday for half a day,” she says, “what I do is welcome and talk to the new patients and try to orientate and put them at ease. I always share my experience with them – how I couldn’t even walk when I first arrived and how happy I am now that I can walk again. I hope that when they see how far I’ve come, they will be inspired to work hard to get better.”

*JUST HAPPY TO BE ABLE  
TO WALK AGAIN*

***Mdm Sara Bte Ariffin***





## *DON'T TELL ME I CAN'T*

**Ms Doreen Goh**

Doreen Goh, 70, has a fighting spirit in her and thrives on challenges. So when she hurt her back from an accident at home, which led to her inability to walk, she did everything to make sure she could walk again.

She consulted an orthopaedic doctor and was treated for chronic right sciatica at National University Hospital (NUH) before transferring to Ang Mo Kio-Thye Hua Kwan Hospital (AMK-THKH) subsequently for rehabilitation. Given the severity of her condition, she was put through a daily regime of physiotherapy and occupational therapy. It was hard at first but Doreen persevered, very much like how she deals with everything in her life. “That was how I perfected my pandan cake recipe, by trying and trying and trying again,” explains Doreen who doesn’t believe in giving up.

Ever eager to learn, Doreen believes age is not an issue when it comes to picking up new skills and knowledge. She entered the real estate industry when she was 58 and aced the Common Examination for Salesperson Scheme (CES) certification for real estate agents on her first try. In this competitive industry, Doreen is known for her lively personality and going the extra mile for her clients. The fact that she was hospitalised did not matter, she was not going to let her clients down. “From my hospital bed I still managed to close a couple of housing rental deals,” says Doreen proudly.

A self-driven and highly motivated individual, Doreen believes that regardless of what happens, life has to go on. That is why she refused to let any of the other patients wallow in self-pity or give up trying to get better. In her six-bedded ward, there was always much laughter and lively chats among patients.

By the time she was discharged a month and a half later, she could walk independently even though it was with a walking aid and only for short distances.

Today, Doreen is able to walk and drive independently. She continues with her weekly acupuncture sessions at the Thye Hua Kwan TCM Medical Centre located at AMK-THKH which she happily looks forward to since it gives her the chance to visit the nurses and patients whom she had befriended during her stay at the hospital. These visits are always more than welcome as Doreen brings much cheer to the patients with her lively personality.

She is 80 years old and single. Although she should be institutionalised since it is not safe for her to live alone, Wong Wai Chong will not consider it because to her “there’s no place like home.”

She wears a pacemaker, hearing aid and walks with a walking frame because she has had two hip fractures but still insists on living independently.

“I used to have two flatmates living with me,” shares Wai Chong, “but they have since passed on.” Now she lives alone in a two-room rental flat. Despite the modest living conditions, Wai Chong is contented. “On my own, I have all my freedom and my independence,” she insists.

Her independent streak probably stems from the fact that her mother died when she was in her early 20s. With no siblings and a father who was never around, she had no choice but to fend for herself. That is why even in her old age, she insists on doing things on her own although she does get some help from the Thye Hua Kwan Home Help Service East. “They take her to all her medical appointments and deliver meals to her house twice a day,” explains Chuah Chong Hong, Medical Social Worker at the Ren Ci Hospital.

While some believe that it is bad luck to talk about death, this feisty old lady is open, frank and unafraid. “I may push myself to do things on my own but I know my limits. I am also aware that I must not fall,” says Wai Chong, “and why be afraid of death, everybody will die eventually,” chuckles the old lady whose favourite pastimes are to watch TV, go to the market and cook.

“The market is a 20 minute walk from where I live and I go there everyday,” says Wai Chong who uses this daily trip as a form of exercise.

“I’ve been a social worker for four years and have seen many patients but none quite like Mdm Wong. She is the most positive-minded woman I have ever seen,” says Chong Hong. “Her resilience and determination to lead an independent life is really admirable.”

## *NO PLACE LIKE HOME*

***Mdm Wong Wai Chong***





Our  
Inspirational  
Caregivers

“Since Stephen was diagnosed with Chronic Granulomatous Disease (CGD) at three months old, life has been an emotional roller-coaster,” admits Stephen’s mother, 33-year-old Karen Oon. A teacher who has been on no-pay leave for the past two years, Karen has dedicated all her time to caring for Stephen, who has a rare form of immune deficiency that makes him prone to infections. His only cure is a bone marrow transplant. But until he gets a transplant, Stephen needs to be cared for very carefully as even the slightest infection can be life-threatening.

Stephen’s condition means that the Oons have had to make many lifestyle changes such as adhering to a strict hygiene practice, limiting their contact with the outside world as far as possible and being particularly careful not to fall sick so as not to pick up and/or pass any infection on to Stephen.

Despite their best efforts, Stephen is still plagued with infections in the form of abscesses, multiple perianal fistulas and chronic bowel inflammation. To date, Stephen has undergone more than 10 surgeries and has had long periods of stay at the hospital.

While caring for Stephen at home is stressful since he requires 24/7 care to tend to his many open wounds and round-the-clock medication, it gets even tougher when he is hospitalised because the family is split apart. While Karen spends time with Stephen at the hospital, Daniel, Stephen’s father, shuttles between work, the hospital and home; does the house work and tries to spend as much quality time as possible with their other child.

Recently, the Oons welcomed a new baby to the family and that has changed the family dynamics somewhat and upped their responsibilities to a whole new level especially for Karen who, besides having to tend to Stephen’s needs, now also has to contend with breastfeeding on top of fulfilling her on-going duties as mum to three kids! Daniel’s situation is no better as he continues to work, carry out his nursing and fatherly duties as well as see to the house chores.

The Oons are certainly not your average family. But then, nothing is average when you have a child who needs round-the-clock special care. Nevertheless, Daniel and Karen try their best to give their kids, especially Stephen, as close to a normal life as possible and that was exactly what inspired Winna So, Hospital Play Specialist at KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital’s Rehabilitation Department to nominate them for this award.

“Although Stephen spends a lot of his time in the hospital, they try to keep him actively stimulated by helping him learn his vocabulary through reading and watching his favourite television programmes,” says Winna. “Regardless of his condition, Stephen has all the needs of a normal toddler – physical, intellectual, cognitive, developmental and social emotional learning. Together with Stephen’s parents, our focus is to help the child develop these skills. It is challenging, but we believe every effort counts,” she adds.

## *NOT YOUR AVERAGE FAMILY*

*Mr Daniel & Mrs Karen Oon*





## MY LITTLE GIFT FROM GOD

### **Ms Fadiana Binte Dahlan**

When her youngest child, Darwis, had a fit when he was only five months old, Fadiana Dahlan, 32, went into a panic, like any mother would. She rushed him to the hospital where she was told that he has epilepsy. Darwis suffered many more attacks in the months that followed, with one particularly serious case that landed him in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) where he stayed for three months.

He underwent several tests before he was finally diagnosed to be suffering from a condition known as Malignant Migrating Partial Seizures of Infancy or MMPSI for short. Since then Darwis has been put on a special ketogenic diet in addition to a battery of medication.

Thankfully, with his new diet, Darwis' epilepsy has been under control. But with epilepsy, one can never really know when it will strike and that is Fadiana's greatest fear. That and the question: what happens when she can no longer afford the special milk that Darwis needs? Each can of milk costs \$90 and it lasts just two days. That works out to almost \$1,000 a month.

Besides the financial strain, taking care of Darwis is a stressful job. He may be two years old but his development is only that of a four- or five-month-old and, therefore, needs to be watched over closely. It is also crucial that Fardiana keeps her eyes on Darwis for signs of any on-coming attack. Fortunately for Fadiana, her two older children, Soffan, 11, and Sofya, 10, help with caring for their youngest brother. "Sofya even helps with the feeding which is admirable considering that Darwis can only be tube-fed," explains Fadiana,

With three kids and a home to take care of, Fadiana hardly has any time for herself. But she remains strong and pushes on; her care for Darwis - unwavering. "God has gifted me with Darwis and I'm sure God's got something planned for me," says Fadiana. "My mission is to take care of Darwis as best and for as long as I can," she adds. "One day, I hope that Darwis' epilepsy will be a thing of the past."

"It is inspiring to see Fadiana so dedicated to her son's care," says Dr Derrick Chan, Head and Consultant, Department of Paediatric Neurology Service, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH). "Despite severe financial difficulties, she continues to soldier on in caring for Darwis."

Her baby was born with multiple issues as a result of a chromosome disorder. But even though Rachael was born with a cleft palette, a severe heart condition, an anorectal fistula, a brain tumour as well as thyroid and respiratory problems, Rae Mok Rui Wen, 35, considers herself blessed.

“When she was born, the doctors only gave her two weeks to live,” says Rae. “It’s been eight years and everyday has been a blessing!” exclaims Rae.

At eight years old, Rachael has the mental capability of a nine-month-old. She cannot walk, talk, crawl or eat. It seems a daunting task for a first-time mother to have to care for a child with special needs but Rae, took it in her stride.

“I guess I’m lucky because not only has Rachael been a happy child from young, she has also been very easy to manage,” admits Rae, who takes care of Rachael with the help of a very capable helper and a very hands-on husband. There were times over the years when Rae’s optimism was put to the test, such as when Rachael had to undergo major heart surgery when she was only five years old.

“The operation took eight hours and I didn’t think Rachael was going to pull through,” says Rae. She recalls a time when she had to rush Rachael to the hospital because she was experiencing a fit. “I really thought I was going to lose her then. I’ve never felt so scared in my life. I think I must have looked quite pale or on the verge of collapse when I was waiting at the A & E because someone came up to me and offered me a hot drink,” recalls Rae, touched by the gesture.

It is these simple acts of kindness that have moved Rae into action. “I really appreciate all the kind gestures and words of encouragement I have received and I am especially appreciative of the staff at the KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH),” says Rae. “That is why I started volunteering. You know you can only say ‘thank you’ so many times so I decided to pay it forward,” adds Rae.

“Rae has certainly gone beyond her duties as a mother,” states Dr Chan Yoke Hwee, Senior Consultant, Department of Paediatric Subspecialties, Children’s Intensive Care, KKH. “Seeing so many other children with special needs, Rae volunteered to organise KKH’s annual home care party and home visits. It is her compassion and kindness that have spurred her on to bring cheer and support to these children and their families,” explains Dr Chan, “and that is truly admirable.”

## *PAYING IT FORWARD*

***Ms Rae Mok Rui Wen***





## *TOUCHING HEARTS, TOUCHING LIVES*

### ***Mdm Chua Seng Lan***

Chua Seng Lan, 72, is the sole caregiver to her husband who suffered a stroke in 1997. In 2006, her 74-year-old husband, Choo Teow Sin, was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease (PD). This latest health setback added to the stress and challenge of taking care of her husband but Seng Lan was determined to press on.

To help her understand the disease and learn how to take better care of her husband, Seng Lan joined the Parkinson's Support Group at Singapore General Hospital (SGH). "At the support group meetings, Mdm Chua is always looking out for other members," says Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) Irene Sin of Nurse Clinician Specialty Care (NCSC) at SGH. "Sometimes some patients come without their caregiver so I'll help them. For patients who have difficulty getting home, I send them home in my taxi," she says.

Seng Lan is such a generous, selfless person; she offers more than just assistance at the support group meetings. When she won a Parkinson's Star Award, given out by the Parkinson's Disease Society Singapore to patients with PD or to a PD caregiver who has shown exceptional courage and strength in coping with the disease, she used the \$100 voucher she received to buy exercise equipment for members of the support group.

In July 2011, however, Seng Lan received the worst news ever - she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She was more worried about who would take care of her husband than for herself. Determined to fight the disease, she underwent surgery and chemotherapy. "I refused to accept that I was a patient. In my mind, I felt I could do everything," says the ever positive Seng Lan.

Now that she has recovered and her husband's condition is stable Seng Lan is hoping to go back to work to help ease the financial burden that is now borne by their son.

Until she finds a suitable job, Seng Lan is happy to volunteer her time at a free TCM clinic. "I love to study, and knowledge keeps me strong," says Seng Lan.

The past year or so has been extremely hard on 40-year-old Hayati Suaidi. She is a single mother of a 14-year-old son and the only caregiver to her two aged parents. Her mother, 73, suffers from acute leukemia, a result of myelodysplastic syndrome or MDS for short, while her 79-year-old father's slip disc condition became worse because of arthritis.

Hayati was a full-time educator but when her parents needed her, she quit her job without a moment's hesitation. As a freelance educator, she can now focus on taking care of her parents. "I made that decision because I wanted to be there for my parents. Caring for them is my duty," says Hayati. Although it is extremely difficult financially as well as emotionally, Hayati remains optimistic. "I guess I am one of those people who will always try to look for the silver lining in every situation," says Hayati.

Certainly, giving up is never an option for Hayati although there were times when she came close to it. "Whenever I feel like it's getting a little too overwhelming I always go back to my faith," says Hayati who firmly believes that 'God only places on you what he knows you can handle' and that keeps her strong.

Religion has always played a huge part in Hayati's life. In fact, she has even inspired others with motivational verses. "It started out with me posting prayers on Facebook to motivate myself but when I started receiving feedback on how these prayers have helped others, it inspired me to post even more," says Hayati.

"Hayati is always encouraging us and showering us with love and care," says Nurse Clinician (NC) Tan Chor Kien of the Haematology Centre at Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

Despite her busy schedule, Hayati joined the MDS support group to learn how to care for people with MDS. Always keen to share, she volunteered to be a speaker where she spoke about her caregiving experience. Now a committee member of the support group, Hayati plays an even greater role organising meetings and activities.

Always supportive, especially when patients are receiving treatment, Hayati will sit with them and share words of encouragement. "Her sincere approach has encouraged many of our caregivers," says NC Tan, "and any time someone is feeling down, Hayati will always be there to give them a hug." But beneath the soft touch and tender words lies a very strong woman. "The way I look at it, you only have two choices when faced with any tough situation," says Hayati. "You can either be strong, or you can be stronger."

*WHAT DOESN'T BREAK YOU  
MAKES YOU STRONGER*

*Ms Hayati Suaidi*





## LOVE CONQUERS ALL

### **Mrs Christine Peterson**

Her husband, Jeffrey, 80, was diagnosed with early stage dementia a few years ago. He also suffers from high blood pressure, is diabetic and has a heart condition. Christine Peterson, 73, is Jeffrey's main caregiver. Christine herself is a cancer survivor – she was diagnosed with breast cancer about three years ago and has since made a full recovery.

For someone who is extrovert and chatty, it is difficult for Christine to have to deal with Jeffrey's condition because he hardly talks these days and can be unresponsive when engaged in conversations. Christine often feels a sense of loneliness even though her husband is there physically. Fortunately, Christine has a few close friends she can rely on when she is in need of emotional support.

But still, her socialising days are mostly over. Today, Christine is quite the home-body who will not even consider taking a short holiday without Jeffrey. "I just can't bear to leave him," reveals Christine.

"He's like a kid; he feels safe only when I'm around," says Christine. The couple, who have been married for 51 years, now have a reverse in roles. "He did everything for me in the past and I depended on him a lot. He was my pillar. Now it's the reverse," she says. Christine sees to Jeffrey's everyday needs and accompanies him wherever he goes including his follow-up medical appointments and support group meetings.

When she attends the Singapore General Hospital's Dementia Support Group meetings, Christine is often the 'life of the party'. "She brings fun and joy to the group members," observes Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) Theng Li Ping Diane from Nurse Clinician Specialty Care (NCSC).

"Her passion and love extends beyond her husband and it touches the hearts of all the people around her, be it staff or the support group participants," says SSN Diane.

He came to Singapore in 2005 in search of a job. Shao Liwei, 38, was a banking lawyer in China who wanted to seek better job prospects in Singapore. Liwei soon found one and settled in well in no time. But his life was shattered when he was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in December 2010.

Suddenly his life seemed bleak and he felt hopeless. Except for his work mates, no one knew he was ill. Not his parents because he couldn't bear to have them worry about him. So he took on the battle alone, going through surgery followed by chemotherapy.

All alone with no one to cook and care for him, Liwei lost 20kg within three months. "My nausea was so bad that I could only live on bread and milk alone," remembers Liwei. Coping with the side effects of chemotherapy was really hard for Liwei who even contemplated suicide during this difficult period.

With his friends' encouragement though, Liwei realised that he had to keep positive, so he joined the Colorectal Cancer Support Group. "Hearing other patients' personal accounts of how they got through the treatments gave me hope," says Liwei who finally managed to overcome his depression and eventually made a full recovery.

Unfortunately, about a year after his own devastating discovery, Liwei learned that his father too was displaying the same cancer symptoms. Under the pretext of having his father come to Singapore for a holiday, Liwei made arrangements for his father to see the same doctor that treated him.

Learning that his father also had cancer was an even bigger blow for Liwei. Being the loving son that he is, Liwei took excellent care of his father. "Unlike me, my father did not lose any weight. I took good care of him. I cooked for him and made sure he ate well. To build up his strength, I also encouraged him to exercise and when he was down, I would encourage him," says Liwei.

With Liwei by his side, his father managed to overcome his own battle against cancer and has since returned to China. Liwei still calls him everyday to make sure he does his exercises and takes his medicine. Here in Singapore, Liwei continues to lead a healthy life. He also makes it a point to walk about 5km every day and jogs and swims regularly.

"Liwei's story really inspires us," says Carol Loi, Genetic Counsellor from the Department of Colorectal Surgery, and Tan Pei Yi, Medical Social Worker from the Medical Social Services Department, Singapore General Hospital (SGH). "We admire his optimism and unconditional love for his father. He is an incredible source of inspiration to us all."

## *WINNING NOT ONE BUT TWO BATTLES*

***Mr Shao Liwei***





## *A MOTHER'S LABOUR OF LOVE*

***Mdm Tay L H***

When her daughter, 22, was diagnosed with Behcet's Disease, an incurable form of autoimmune disease, Mdm Tay, 61, knew she needed her undivided attention and care. Mdm Tay made the decision to quit her job to take care of her. Her daughter has had multiple surgeries including one to remove half of her large colon and continues to suffer extreme pain from inflammation and ulcers in her intestines. She currently has a stoma bag and is on total parenteral nutrition (TPN) as she cannot take anything orally.

Due to her severe condition, her daughter has to be admitted to the hospital every three to four months, with each stay lasting an average of two months. The longest so far was a seven month stay in the hospital. "Whenever her daughter is hospitalised, Mdm Tay would stay with her daughter every night to keep her company and comfort her," says Senior Nurse Clinician (SNC) Ong Choo Eng of Nurse Clinician Specialty Care (NCSC) at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH). "She would then leave in the wee hours of the morning to go home and do household chores before returning to the hospital again to be with her daughter," adds SNC Ong, admiring Mdm Tay's dedication, love and sacrifice.

"Sometimes when there are flare-ups, it can get unbearably painful for her," says Mdm Tay, "but all she does is lie down and keep still. It saddens me to see her in so much pain but what is more painful is that I know that she is keeping quiet so that she does not inconvenience us," says Mdm Tay sadly. "When she is in pain and cannot do anything, I attend to all her needs," says Mdm Tay and this includes changing the stoma bag which can be quite challenging in her daughter's case as the stoma bag does not adhere well to her skin which is uneven due to scar tissue.

Although it was difficult initially, through trial and error, Mdm Tay finally learnt how to change the stoma bag and set up the TPN feed for her daughter. "This goes to show that as long as one is willing to try and is determined to make things better for the patient, one can conquer any insurmountable tasks," says SNC Ong. "Mdm Tay's willingness to learn inspires me and I'm sure it is an inspiration for other caregivers too," she adds.

"Seeing her suffer, I know that I have to carry on and stay strong. I get the strength from knowing that she is trying her best to get well and carry on with life despite her suffering and pain," adds Mdm Tay. "Her refusal to give up inspires me and I tell myself everyday that I have to be strong for her."

It saddens them to see their brother reduced to half the size he used to be. In just a few short years, Chong Ah Huat, 48, has lost more than just his weight; he has also lost the ability to walk and eat on his own, he has lost his sight, his hearing and his speech. He was also robbed of his handsome features from a cancer that started out as a mass on the right side of his face which has since spread. Ah Huat is now at a point where active treatment is no longer possible. All the doctors can do now is to make Ah Huat as comfortable as he can be and change his dressing three times a week.

“As long as the dressing makes him feel better and he wants to continue treatment, we will support him,” says Ah Huat’s sister, Chong Shun Mei, 51, who together with her brother, 52-year-old Chong Ah Tat, accompanies Ah Huat to all his medical appointments.

Each dressing change takes at least an hour. The very hands-on brother-and-sister duo are always every ready to help out, for which Staff Nurse (SN) Looi Woan Tyng from the Nurse Clinician Department at National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) is most appreciative of. “Sometimes they may look anxious or they may over react but I’m sure it is only because they are concerned about their brother.”

Their love for him is evident, judging by their dedicated care. The fact that they have taken time off from work three mornings a week for the last one and a half years to accompany him to all his medical appointments, speaks volumes about the love for their younger brother.

“We are realistic about his condition and always try to keep him positive - by assuring him that no matter what, we will never abandon him,” says Ah Tat. “It is this strong family tie that I find truly admirable,” says SN Looi. “I’m so touched by their love for their little brother.”

*HE WILL ALWAYS BE OUR  
BELOVED BROTHER*

*Mr Chong Ah Tat & Ms Chong Shun Mei*





## *GOING THAT EXTRA MILE*

### ***Mr Sundarajoo Panirsilvam***

Being in the service industry, going the extra mile for customers is a norm for Sundarajoo Panirsilvam, 57. If that is the attitude shown to perfect strangers, what more to a loved one? Since his wife was diagnosed with cancer about a year ago, Panir has been focusing his energy on caring for his wife. Despite the long hours at work, Panir remains committed to caring for his wife.

One of their favourite activities is cooking together. Sadly, his wife's cancer has taken a turn for the worse - it has metastasized to the lungs, lymph nodes and brain and she is now on palliative chemotherapy. This latest development has spurred Panir to spend even more time with her.

That is Panir for you, whether at home or at work; he is always courteous, friendly, thoughtful and well-known for always going the extra mile. In the 14 years he has been in the Food & Beverage (F&B) line, he has been known to go out of his way for his customers.

Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) Tan Tiew Yah of Clinic A at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) relates an incident: "Just recently Mr Panir who was with his wife waiting to see the doctor saw me and another patient's wife struggling to keep her husband on the trolley bed. Mr Panir came forward to help immediately. His spontaneity and readiness to help has definitely inspired and motivated me," she says.

Panir is always saying how supportive and nice his supervisors are to allow him time off to accompany his wife for all her medical appointments but it is obvious that they do it because Panir is a good employee whom they value. His bosses are so impressed with Panir's dedication at work and his devotion to his wife that they recently published his inspiring story in their in-house publication – a story that showed his positive attitude towards life. It is clear this warm tribute is for a man who is most deserving, whose kind deeds have touched the hearts of many.

They met 10 years ago and immediately hit it off. “We were like a pair of love birds,” says Atago Shuto, 33. Three years ago, Atago married the love of his life and they were ready to start a family.

“Our marriage was blissful,” says Atago, “and when we found out she was pregnant, we were just so happy.” In March 2012, Atago and Ye Yuan welcomed their first born. They named him Haru, meaning sunshine or springtime.

But their happiness was short-lived. On the 10th day after delivery, Ye Yuan felt a sudden weakness and became breathless. Atago rushed her to hospital but on arrival, Ye Yuan collapsed. “Her heart stopped and it took eight shocks to revive her,” recalls Atago.

Ye Yuan was hospitalised for more than four months before she was finally discharged. There was nothing more the doctors could do for Ye Yuan. Her brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long.

With work and a newborn in hand, Atago knew that caring for Ye Yuan at home would be challenging. So he made the heart-wrenching decision to move her to a nursing home but after just 10 days, he changed his mind and brought her home. He simply could not bear the thought of being away from his wife. He also wanted his young child to be acquainted with his mother. He bought all the necessary equipment and engaged the services of two nursing aides to help him to take care of Ye Yuan while he is at work.

When he is home, Atago is very hands-on, seeing to all of Ye Yuan’s needs while he goes about telling her about his day and how the baby is doing.

“No words can describe my admiration for Mr Atago,” says Ms Liew Siok Moey, Nursing Project Coordinator from the Nursing Development Unit at the National Heart Centre Singapore (NHCS).” As a first-time parent, it is commendable that he is able to shoulder so much responsibility to not only take care of his bedridden wife but also his young son. His optimism and perseverance has deeply inspired and motivated me in my work,” adds Ms Liew.

“It has been challenging, both physically and emotionally. Finances are tight too with the on-going treatment and home-care,” admits Atago. “But if you think I am suffering, she is suffering more,” shares Atago. So deep is his love for his wife that he Atago remains committed to caring for her, no matter what it takes.

## *MY ONE TRUE LOVE*

***Mr Atago Shuto***





## THE POWER OF PRAYER

### **Mr Peter Lim**

“I was on my way to Kuala Lumpur when I received news of Gloria’s collapse,” says Peter Lim, referring to the devastating news that his eldest daughter Gloria, 19, had suffered a heart attack and had to be rushed to hospital.

“The Senior Cardiologist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) said that Gloria’s prognosis was not good and suggested that she be transferred to the Cardiothoracic Unit at the National Heart Centre Singapore (NHCS),” explains Peter. Gloria was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at NHCS where she stayed for two weeks. There, the neurologist confirmed that Gloria’s brain was damaged and that there was only a very slim chance of recovery.

A staunch Christian, Peter turned to God. “Everyday my family and I prayed for Gloria’s recovery and that we would have the strength to take care of her,” shares Peter. Their faith kept them going. “Every morning without fail, Peter or his wife would be by Gloria’s bedside singing hymns and reading the Bible to her,” says Ms Liew Siok Moey, Nursing Project Coordinator from the Nursing Development Unit at NHCS.

Miraculously, Gloria regained consciousness and her condition started to improve. “Every little improvement was a motivation for us,” says Peter. Gloria was eventually transferred to SGH’s rehabilitation ward at Alexandra Hospital for intensive rehabilitation.

Over time, Gloria was able to eat and communicate with her loved ones. “Seeing her able to sit up and swallow for the first time was just amazing,” says Peter. After two months of intensive rehabilitation, Gloria was finally discharged.

“Gloria is fine now except for a slight limp when walking,” shares Peter, “and she still needs to go for physiotherapy, occupational and speech therapy at TTSH. “But it is not all work and no play for Gloria, who has started playing the piano again,” adds Peter, pleased with how far his daughter has progressed.

“I am inspired by Mr Lim’s dedicated care which paid off as Gloria is now able to walk independently and her memory is steadily returning,” says Ms Liew. “It is wonderful to see Gloria back to being the sweet young girl that she used to be, socialising with her church and school friends and looking forward to returning back to school soon,” she adds.

Peter credits Gloria’s recovery to God for answering their prayers and providing all the required help. “When Gloria was in hospital, some of our church friends took leave to relieve us at night and when she was recuperating at home,” shares Peter.

His advice to other caregivers is - “Just continue to do what you are supposed to do, have faith and God will take care of everything.”

It is not easy to watch someone you love waste away. But that is exactly what 49-year-old Angelia Choo went through. “It was very painful to see my mother, who has always been fit, degenerate so much in just a matter of months,” says Angelia.

Angelia’s mother was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)/Motor Neurone Disease (MND) in August 2010 and by end 2011, her mother’s condition had deteriorated so quickly that she was physically weak, her speech became impaired and she had to be tube-fed because she could no longer swallow. Despite the adversities that struck the family, Angelia made sure that her mother lived her final years with dignity and grace by encouraging her to continue doing the things she enjoyed such as planning daily menus, marketing, watching TV and engaging in discussions on current affairs.

“I refused to treat her like an invalid just because she was ill,” says Angelia. “Perhaps by allowing her to go about her daily activities as far as possible, it helped to boost her morale,” explains Angelia.

“When Angelia returned home from work, she made sure to spend time with her mother either chatting or watching her favourite television shows with her.

“There was no sacrifice on my part,” insists Angelia. “It is out of our sense of love and duty that we took care of her and tried to give her the best quality of life we possibly could,” adds Angelia. “When we were young, she took care of us so naturally it was our turn.”

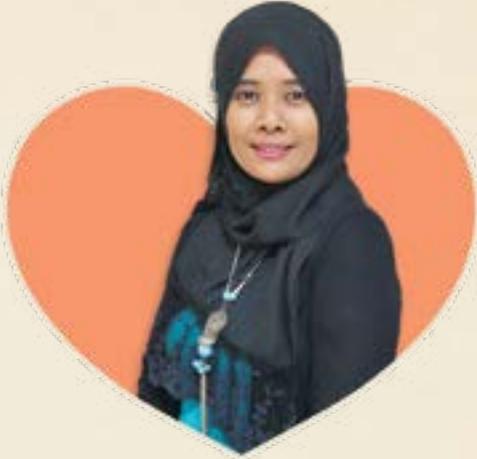
Despite the best intentions, Angelia admits it is very trying to be a caregiver. “It is important to give yourself a break to recharge.” That is why Angelia encouraged her helper to go down for a walk to relax. “I love shopping, particularly at the supermarket so that was what I did to relax,” shares Angelia.

“Even though her mother passed away almost a year ago, Angelia still remains actively involved with the MND support group where she shares her knowledge and experiences as a caregiver,” says Dr Mavis Ang, Registrar from the Neurology Department of the National Neuroscience Institute (NNI). “Angelia shares practical tips on how to care for patients with disabilities and offers realistic coping advice like how to avoid caregiver burnout,” adds Dr Ang. “She also reaches out to patients from the other hospitals as well – that is impressive,” adds Dr Ang.

## *IT’S NOT EASY, SHE’S MY MOTHER*

**Ms Angelia Choo**





## *ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IF YOU BELIEVE*

***Mdm Mislina Kasman***

Her whole world collapsed in 2004 when her husband Adnan suffered a severe head injury as a result of a horrific road traffic accident. “When I saw him for the first time after the accident, he was in a vegetative state and it broke my heart,” says Mislina Kasman, 42, mother of four.

“I couldn’t believe it when the doctors said that he would most likely stay that way, I just refused to accept it,” says Mislina. “It was not denial, it’s just that I strongly believed that he would come out of it,” she explains.

“I tried to gather as much information as I could about Adnan’s condition whether it was from books, from the Internet, and talking to friends,” says Mislina.

With the dedicated care from healthcare staff, Adnan started to show improvement. “The first sign was when he could recite his Identity Card (IC) number. We were all so happy. It was a huge progress,” recalls Mislina. Adnan can now talk, albeit a little incoherently and he can walk independently although he needs someone to stand by him just in case he trips and falls. His epilepsy is also under control because they know what the triggers are and try to avoid them.

“It has been a really drastic change for the family and we’ve all learned to cope,” says Mislina who has been a housewife since she had her first child more than 20 years ago. She now does everything – take care of her husband, the family, the house as well as worry about finances.

Mislina admits that she had depression a few years ago due to caregiver fatigue. Even then, she never once considered it a burden to care for her husband. “It is my responsibility as a wife,” she says. Learning from experience, Mislina is now able to better juggle all her responsibilities and takes time out to de-stress. Besides spending time with the kids, Mislina also hangs out with her girlfriends whom she affectionately calls ‘my kakis’.

“My kids are my pillars of strength. They are always urging me to take a holiday and insist that I should live life to the fullest,” says Mislina.

“The improvements we see in Adnan really surprised us,” says Nurse Clinician (NC) Lee Kah Keow of National Neuroscience Institute’s Neurosurgery Department. “I am certain that it is through her unfaltering effort that her husband is progressing so well.”

Mdm Keng, 63, lives with and takes care of her two sisters since their health took a turn for the worse more than 20 years ago.

Her elder sister, who suffers from glaucoma, is blind in one eye and has weak vision in the other eye. That is why Mdm Keng accompanies her sister wherever she goes. “I would rather take the trouble to accompany her than see something happen to her,” explains Mdm Keng.

Not exactly young herself Mdm Keng says “I will do what I can for as long as I can. Every day I pray that I am well enough so that I am able to care for them,” says Mdm Keng who visits the Kwan Yin Temple at Waterloo Street regularly to pray for her sisters’ health.

Her younger sister, who is in her 50s, has health issues too and Mdm Keng makes sure that her sister takes her medication daily and goes for all her follow-up medical appointments.

Looking after two sisters with chronic health issues is challenging to say the least. She has been a dedicated caregiver all these years but Mdm Keng is not one to look for praise or rewards “It’s my duty to look after my sisters. I’m also grateful that my sister and her son welcomed me into their home after my divorce many years ago. I’m just happy to have three meals a day and a roof over my head,” she adds humbly.

Mdm Keng’s unwavering effort in caring for her sisters is remarkable. “For years, Mdm Keng has been looking after every aspect of her sisters’ well-being with never a word of complaint,” says Senior Enrolled Nurse (SEN) Ong Chui Hong of Clinic C, Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC). “She gives her two sisters not only the physical support but also the emotional and psychological support they need to stay strong,” adds SEN Ong. It is obvious that Mdm Keng’s tireless effort stems from what is pure sisterly love.

*PURE SISTERLY LOVE*

***Mdm Keng C L***





## *A MOTHER'S LOVE AND DEDICATION*

### ***Mdm Toh Gea Kim***

She noticed something strange when her baby was only about a month old. A consultation with the doctors revealed that her baby had a tumour in one eye while the other eye was partially blocked. It was an eye cancer known as retinoblastoma. Not the kind of news a mother would want to hear about her child whatever the age. But Toh Gea Kim, 52, didn't have time to wallow in pity. She had to help her child get well and adjust to life without sight.

Of her three kids, Hui Xin, who is now 18, is her youngest. Gea Kim remembers Hui Xin's growing up years. "Keeping an eye on Hui Xin was a full-time job. She couldn't see so she would bump into things wherever she went," says Gea Kim who also had to look after her two other children.

Gea Kim admits that after all these years of caring for Hui Xin, it is hard to stop worrying and let go especially now when Hui Xin, being a typical teenager, wants greater independence. Gea Kim admits that she is still very protective of her youngest daughter. "I worry about Hui Xin all the time since her school hours are long and especially if she's travelling home when traffic is heavy," she says

"I am very impressed by Mdm Toh's dedication. For the sake of her daughter's education and to ensure her safety, she is willing to spend five to six hours a day travelling to bring Hui Xin to school and to pick her up again," says Priscilla Lim, Medical Social Worker from the Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC). "This is what motherly love is all about," she adds.

Christine Chew has been taking care of her aged parents for years without a word of complaint. Her mother has knee problems in addition to high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Still, this is nothing compared to her father's condition. "You name it, he's got it," says Christine whose father is not only diabetic and has a heart condition, but also has obstructive sleep apnea, kidney and eye problems. He has recovered from colon cancer and is undergoing routine follow-up. "Yes, it's tiring," admits the 44-year-old who accompanies her parents to all their medical appointments moving from the Bedok Polyclinic to Singapore General Hospital (SGH), National Heart Centre Singapore (NHCS) and Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC). "I don't have time to think about myself. I just do it because if something were to happen to them, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

Meticulous in her care for her parents, Christine painstakingly administers her father's medication – he takes more than 10 different types of medicines daily – and closely monitors her father's condition for changes so that she can act on them before they become a problem. "Only when I know that my parents are ok can I have the peace of mind to concentrate on my work," explains Christine.

As Senior Catering Sales Manager in charge of wedding sales in a five-star hotel, Christine's job is very demanding. Yet, she has managed to find a way to not only juggle her career with caring for her aged parents, but to also have the time to take her niece and nephews out on weekends and school holidays. Her off-days, too, are usually spent taking her parents for medical check-ups and out for meals, as well as helping them with the housework. Whatever little time she has left after that, she spends on her phone messaging inspirational quotes and motivational phrases to friends and loved ones, especially those who are sick, namely her beloved cousin who has recovered from lymphoma and is undergoing routine follow-up as well as a friend diagnosed with terminal stage cervical cancer. "The fact is, I'm surrounded by sick people and all I want is for them to be well," says this selfless woman who has her own medical issues to deal with – diabetes, gastrointestinal and fatty liver problems – and who herself has undergone not one, but six surgeries!

"Sometimes I take my frustrations out on my friends and colleagues but they are very understanding," says Christine gratefully. "They bear with me, console me and even give me advice when I'm depressed," she adds. But what really keeps her going is seeing her parents happy and well. Sometimes when she is really tired, she browses through her collection of lovely pictures and Buddhist sayings for a quick 'pick-me-up'.

"The level of dedication she demonstrates to care for her parents is very rare these days when everyone is so busy with their own lives," says Sarah Tay, Clinic Pharmacy Manager at Bedok Polyclinic. "She is a great source of support to her parents and is always seeking our advice on how she can provide even better care for them, which is really inspiring!" she adds.

*WHEN THEY ARE OK, I AM OK*

***Ms Christine Chew Ai Ling***





## *A MOTHER'S LOVE, LIKE NO OTHER*

### **Mdm Pan Chiak Lin**

Mdm Pan Chiak Lin, 64, a massage therapist, retired two years ago because of her asthma condition. Lately her asthma has gotten much worse but she remains optimistic.

After all, it is this positive attitude that has gotten her through the past 39 years since her twin sons were born. "I only discovered they were autistic when I tried to register them for nursery school," shares Chiak Lin.

"Taking care of them is mentally and physically challenging," she admits. "They are like 'giants' to her petite frame, with each of them easily three times her weight and size." says Dr Jonathan Yeo, Family Physician from Queenstown Polyclinic. As they are also fraught with health issues – one suffers from mental problems while the other is diabetic and has hypertension – she has to bring them to all their outpatient medical appointments, but never together. When she takes one out, she has to lock the other in a room at home and, on the rare occasions when she has to run an errand, she locks both of them at home but in separate rooms. She recalls how once, when she left both of them together, they ended up fighting the whole time till she got back.

Although they cannot speak – they only grunt and make very loud sounds – over the years, Chiak Lin has mastered the art of interpreting their different noises and she roughly understands what they want. Unfortunately, no one else does and that is what worries her the most. That is why, while she can, Chiak Lin tries to teach them the basics like how to brush their teeth, how to wear their clothes and simple communication skills. When it comes to the day when she can no longer take care of them, Chiak Lin hopes there is a chance that they can lead an independent life. So far it has been trying but she is thankful for any improvement made, however slight.

"Mdm Pan has given more than half her life to tirelessly caring for her two mentally-challenged children," says Dr Yeo. And for the most part, she has done this alone, as her husband called it quits and divorced her when the boys were still young.

It is said that a mother can endure much pain, be it physical or mental. But when a child cannot reciprocate her love or display affection, it is heartbreaking. That is why, as Dr Yeo so aptly puts it, "Her unconditional love for them despite the loud and obtrusive noises they emit in public and their inability to reciprocate her love directly is indeed exemplary and commendable."

Her 85-year-old mother suffers from chronic kidney failure brought on by years of high blood pressure and for almost two years now, Mdm Lily Tan Bock Hway, 61, has been the primary caregiver for her mother, making sure she gets her daily dialysis on time.

Hooking her mother up on the dialysis machine may sound like an easy task but it is not. "Initially I was very stressed," admits Lily. "I practised connecting and disconnecting but my fingers were always shaking. It took me nearly a month to overcome it," relates Lily.

To prepare her mother for dialysis, Lily who works as a general clerk, has to leave work an hour early everyday so that she could be home in time to do it. "Since my mum started dialysis, I have also stopped going out in the evenings and stay at home in case there is a problem with the machine," says Lily. "

Being a caregiver is no doubt tiring and can be overwhelming too. "At times when I am sick or feeling down, I just think of my mum, her concern and love for me, how she has cared for me and her 'never give up' attitude and that encourages me to keep going," says Lily.

In January 2011, Lily's mother was put on monthly Micera injections. "Since then, every month when her mother has an appointment at the Bukit Merah Polyclinic, Mdm Tan would take the trouble to go to the Pharmacy at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) to purchase the injection first before coming down to the clinic," says Senior Staff Nurse (SSN) M Indra Devi of the Bukit Merah Polyclinic. It may be troublesome but Lily insists that her mother gets her injection from a freshly pre-filled syringe.

"We all have to make sacrifices sometime in our lives. But I am not complaining," says Lily. "Together with my nieces, brothers and sister, we all just want to give my mum the best care possible," she says.

"It is admirable how she sees to her mother's well-being," comments SSN Indra, "especially the way she provides her with the much needed physical, psychological and emotional support."

## *OFFERING THE BEST CARE POSSIBLE*

***Mdm Tan Bock Hway***





## *BUT HE IS MY FATHER*

***Ms Rachel Wong Fui Lih***

Rachel Wong, 36, quit her job as Shift Manager at Starbucks two years ago to take care of her 75-year-old father-in-law who suffers from diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol and mild dementia.

In March 2012, her father-in-law's condition took a turn for the worse when he had surgery to remove an abscess on his right buttock and for three months after that, he refused to get out of bed, leading to muscle deterioration.

Rachel became his main caregiver, attending to all his needs. "When her father-in-law became bedridden and wheelchair-bound, Rachel did everything for him. She prepared his food, made sure he took his medication and accompanied him to all his medical appointments," says Staff Nurse (SN) Anbukkarasi from the Bukit Merah Polyclinic.

Although Rachel takes good care of her father-in-law, it is obvious that he is not happy living with her. "He misses his home and wants to go back and thinks that I am the one stopping him so he is always angry with me," says Rachel. The sad truth is, it is her mother-in-law who will not take him back unless he can walk on his own because she is too old and too weak to care for him. "So as long as he is wheelchair-bound, he will live with me while my mother-in-law lives with her daughter," states Rachel.

Rachel understands that he is a patient so she accepts whatever tantrums her father-in-law hurls at her. "It's alright, I can take it," claims Rachel although she admits to getting angry and raising her voice at him once when he insisted on dying. "I asked him 'Why do you always talk about dying when here I am doing my best to keep you well and as comfortable as possible!'" relates Rachel.

"As a daughter-in-law, Rachel has carried out her role well. She could have just placed him in a nursing home, but she chose to care for him at home," says SN Anbukkarasi who is moved by Rachel's filial piety.

"Some would say that I am just the daughter-in-law so why do I care so much," says Rachel, "but to me there is no such thing as father-in-law; once you are married, he is your father."

Doris Goh, 40, and her husband were making plans to improve their lives. After years of being a bartender, her husband decided to become a waiter as it offered better prospects. Doris too, was about to embark on a career in healthcare.

But all their plans changed drastically when her husband met with a road traffic accident in June 2010.

Doris and her two children were on their way to visit her sister in Kuala Lumpur when they received the tragic news. "I felt so lost and helpless," remembers Doris whose husband sustained a traumatic subarachnoid haemorrhage.

The unfortunate accident left her husband physically disabled. He has to be tube-fed and can hardly communicate since his speech is impaired. His memory is affected too, he is often moody and depressed, and is prone to periodic violent outbursts.

Never a sociable person, Doris often encourages her husband to participate in hospital activities "I'm sure he would recover better and faster if I could just devote more time and attention to him," says Doris who sadly admits that she can only see her husband once a week because she has to work and take care of the children.

Doris tries to take her husband, who is a resident at Ren Ci Nursing Home, back home whenever she can. Otherwise, she would be at the nursing home every weekend with the kids. Doris also accompanies her husband to all his follow-up medical appointments. This gives her the opportunity to learn more about his condition.

"I don't think I am an optimistic person but the encouragement and care I receive from people give me hope," admits Doris who hopes that one day, her husband's condition will improve especially since the children are growing up and they need their father.

*IF ONLY I HAD MORE TIME*

**Mdm Doris Goh Fun Cheng**





## *A LIFE DEDICATED TO CAREGIVING*

### **Ms Serena Siau Kim Ooi**

It takes a special kind of person to devote their entire life to caring for aged parents. Serena Siau, 59, is one such person. Her 83-year-old father has been suffering from Parkinson's for years and although he is mobile with the aid of a walking stick, she still supervises his every move to prevent him from falling.

In July 2012, Serena's caregiving responsibilities doubled when her mother had a stroke. Serena was still working full-time and it was tough having to juggle work while caring for two elderly parents – managing their day-to-day needs and seeing to their medical appointments. Still, she managed to provide them with all the love and care as well as physical and emotional support they needed. But something had to give.

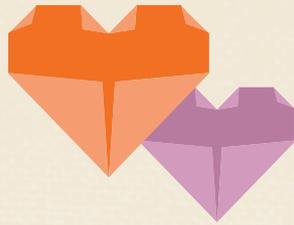
In November 2012, she gave up her job to devote all her time to care for her parents. But being a full-time caregiver can be challenging, not only physically, but emotionally too. On occasion, her friends invite her out for lunch to give her that much needed break but when she does accept, she is always quick to rush back home to attend to her parents.

"You may say it is a sacrifice," says Serena, "but I don't mind it at all. It is my responsibility. I am their daughter," asserts Serena.

What upsets her most though is when her mother craves for food that she can no longer eat. "Before the stroke, my mother could still eat and I would buy her whatever she craved but now she can't because she is on nasogastric tube feeding," says Serena. "Some days when she is alert, she will gesture that she wants to eat and it really breaks my heart to have to tell her that she cannot have any food. She can only have milk fed through the tube," relates Serena on the verge of tears.

"Serena's determination is truly admirable," says Senior Nurse Manager (SNM) Magdalene Lim of Ward 7D at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH). "She is also patient, compassionate and understanding and she has made such a meaningful impact to her parents' lives. We are so touched and humbled by her filial piety and dedication."

*Working Together Towards  
Better Integrated Care*





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