

## Not your usual kind of hospice

By Deborah Choo | SingaporeScene – Sat, Dec 31, 2011

"I think uncle wants to see you," a lady said to Shinee Tham, 57, a volunteer at **HCA Hospice Care**. She was referring to her husband who was on his deathbed.

With no children, and a working wife, Tham was the person he saw most often during his final month.

Almost eight years on, Tham vividly recalls that fateful day. She had met "uncle" soon after starting to volunteer at HCA, but a worsening health condition soon had him transferred to **Dover Park Hospice Care**, just next door. Out of concern, she started visiting him daily to bring him food.

That night, Tham showed up to find him suffering in pain. Taking his hand, she said, "Uncle, please go in peace." A tear rolled down his cheek, and with his wife and Tham at his bedside, he passed on.

That incident changed her forever. "I became stronger – mentally, emotionally," said Tham, who has continued to volunteer regularly at HCA. She used to volunteer her time there three to four times a week but these days, she goes in twice a week.

The freelance **Yamuna** body rolling instructor teaches simple exercises that she advocates goes a long way to enhance joint mobility and mental alertness.

Tham also cooks for them and sometimes takes care of transporting the elderly to and from the day care centre. She occasionally supplies tea breaks – some of which are personally funded, while others are sponsored by her clients who have heard of the good work she has been doing.

Death remains a sensitive subject to broach. Health Minister Gan Kim Yong noted this earlier this year and pledged that the ministry will do its best to correct the misconception families have that end-of-life care is "futile".

Emma Goh, Community Relations Manager at HCA Hospice, also acknowledged that hospice is not a popular cause. "The hospice cause may not be at the top of most people's minds," she said.

"Hospice services help to increase patients' quality of life where curative treatment may not be effective. Our volunteers aid us in therapy sessions, befriend our patients and lift their spirits," she added.



Shinee Tham volunteers twice a week at the hospice.



Tham teaches simple exercises at the hospice.

Singapore currently has seven inpatient and home hospice providers.

To meet the rising need for palliative care with Singapore's increasing ageing population, Dover Park Hospice completed their \$2.4 million upgrade in July which sees an expansion of its facilities and patient capacities.

Last month, Assisi Hospice also announced plans costing up to S\$7 million to build a new purpose-built wing, adjacent to their current complex at Thomson Road.

While one may imagine hospice care centers to spell of gloom, HCA Hospice Care sings a somewhat different tune.

### **'I don't see them as sick people'**

The bus arrived punctually at 11:15am. Helpers assisted elderly in alighting from the bus, all of whom greeted staff and volunteers with a cheery "good morning". Despite their difficulties in walking, all of them chatted happily with one another — some gave well wishes, others asked how they were doing.

Most of the elderly Tham meets are over 60 years old, 95 per cent of which are cancer patients. To Tham, they are not patients but rather, people she looks up to learn something from every day.

Speaking of her volunteer experience, she admits that she started seeing things from a different perspective. "You think that you're giving, but in fact you're learning from them. I don't see them as sick people; I look for something special in them."

Tham shared of this man in his 70s who is suffering from brain cancer. "He walks around with a huge bandage on his head. I know he's suffering, but I've never seen the man utter a word of complaint that he's in pain. If something happens to me, I want to be like him."

"They're very grateful for very little things, even a short massage I give them," she added. "Everyone enjoys each other's company."

Watching from a distance, an Indian staff conversed fluently in Hokkein to another elderly.

"Can you get a bull's eye?" the elderly cheekily challenged the staff.

"If you buy me a Red Bull, maybe I can! But not here," the staff wittily replied.

Everyone who overheard burst out laughing, including the reporter herself.

"You'd hardly think it's a hospice center, isn't it?" Goh smiled.

"This seems more like a community centre where everyone gathers on weekends," I replied.

It was soon time for Tham's exercise class which typically lasts 45 minutes. Politely excusing herself, she gathered everyone and put on an old classic CD that belted out songs from the 60s.

Watching everyone following Tham's lead with smiles on their faces, this reporter also left with a different perspective.

*Deborah Choo used to write for an array of websites such as Youth.SG and The Online Citizen. She now blogs in her free*

*time.*

---

Copyright 2011 SingaporeScene

Copyright © 2012 Yahoo! Southeast Asia Pte Ltd. (Co. Reg. No. 199700735D). All Rights Reserved. | Yahoo! News Network | /