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people

Living Before Leaving

New book details how eight hospice patients face death with grace

By Lee Siew Hua

WHEN Mr and Mrs Tan Chowe Teck, both 73, were terminally ill with cancer, they walked their last journey unfalteringly, hand in hand.

Once a burly cement-mixer driver, Mr Tan was diagnosed with liver cancer in 2002. He relied on a walking stick when his legs weakened after a relapse in 2007, but made a surprise decision: He would learn to walk again without aid.

He simply wanted to free his hand, to hold his wife and support her as she walked, and help her with household chores.

Their story is captured in *Departure: Living Before Leaving*, a new 85-page photo-diary that opens a rare window into the lives of eight hospice patients, recording their grace and tenacity in facing death.

The book - to be launched on Monday at the National Library, followed by a photo exhibition the next day - also captures Mrs Tan's love. The thyroid cancer sufferer continued to cook for her husband though she could not eat. She was fed through a tube.

Married for over 40 years, the Teochew-speaking couple spent their final days at Assisi Hospice in Thomson Road. They had downsized earlier to a two-room Circuit Road flat from a bigger Woodlands apartment, and sold off their two cement mixers to meet hefty long-term medical expenses.

She died in August last year. But her husband did not slump into depression, he continued to help another hospice patient walk and get food. He died in July.

The photographer who documented their twilight is Mr Sha Ying, 50, a supervising cameraman at CNBC Asia Pacific in Singapore.

'They were a very ordinary couple, poor and fatally sick, but they lived their life fully and with dignity,' he recalled. He found himself reflecting on his own life while recording theirs, he told *The Straits Times*, and felt he owed them a debt of gratitude for teaching him to 'live my own life better'.

China-born Mr Sha was one of four professional photographers who volunteered for the year-long book project, beginning in the middle of last year. The others were Lianhe Zaobao photographer Ray Chua, Lianhe Zaobao zNOW sub-editor Lim Jen Erh, and freelance photographer Lee Chee Ming.

The book idea was mooted by Mr Michael Goh, managing director of local design house, adamsapple, following the success of a similar project for the Society of the Physically Disabled in 2008.

Departure was funded for about \$40,000 by the Lien Foundation, which leads the Life Before Death initiative. This seeks to get people thinking and talking about a universally taboo subject - death and dying - and highlights the need for better end-of-life care. This is done through social media, art, films and photography.

Proceeds from 2,000 copies of the book, which will be given out for every donation of \$40 and above, will go to the Singapore Hospice Council.

Six of the eight patients featured have since died. The two women alive today are Madam Rani Muniandy (see other story: ['Zest for life helps her stay strong'](#)) and Ms Eunice Situ.

For Ms Situ, 35, as with several other patients, the creation of loving memories for those left behind is a pivotal process.

The lung cancer patient, now with Assisi Hospice Home Care, decided to tidy and paint her Housing Board flat in Hougang. She planned the mini-makeover so the three-room flat would 'remain a beautiful memory' for her sister, whom she lives with, when she is gone. Her friend also held a small wedding celebration in her modest abode.

Ms Situ declined to speak to The Straits Times, but glimpses of her courage and ardour shone through Departure. 'For life is short, we should work hard, play hard and die hard too.

'Cancer is not the end of the world. It's a beginning to another stage of life,' she was quoted as saying.

While patients like her bravely express hope, a sense of loss saturates the book's photographs and narratives.

For the intimate photo-essay on the late Edward Chiang, 49, he asked to change into his work uniform.

A man of few words, he was a completely different person whenever he donned his navy Customs officer attire. His eyes lit up. There was a new air of confidence about him. He posed gamely with his wife, son and daughter.

His photographer, Mr Lee, penned this for the book: 'Suddenly, my camera lens seemed to have transformed into a time machine as it took Edward back to his heyday as a Customs officer.'

He sensed that Mr Chiang was extremely proud of his former job, and continued to relish it in his final days before he died of heart failure last December.

The late Madam Asmah Abdullah, 55, described a deep nostalgia for her childhood in the Philippines before she died of a brain tumour recently.

While being photographed, the daycare patient at HCA Hospice Care sang a Spanish song she had learnt when she was 13. She asked if she could pose next to a photo of herself in her glowing 20s.

Yet, resilience was in abundant supply amid loss, even in the photos or recollections of daily life.

Wisecracking Ramli Kassan, 60, would sew curtains and cushions at home before he died of pelvic cancer this August.

Former tugboat operator Siaji Abdul Rahman, 59, looked to 'little joys' like playing with his beloved granddaughter, Sharifah, a toddler. He died of bone cancer in December last year.

So the book is a 'travelogue' showing that departures are sorrowful - but some have embarked on final journeys with spirit and courage, braced by loved ones and palliative care.

Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of the Lien Foundation, says the book poignantly depicts how families are brought closer through terminal illness and hospice care. 'The patients' strength and courage remind us that life can be rich, authentic and meaningful, even in the shadows of death,' he added.

'We are thankful for these lessons and the privileged insight into their journey.'

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About the book

DEPARTURE: Living Before Leaving is an 85-page photo-diary of eight hospice patients, and their dignified encounter with death and dying.

A copy of the hardcover book will be given for every donation of \$40 and above.

The volume comes with a CD of a song, Together In Life, sung by local artiste Phoebee Ong, 29. The CD can be purchased separately for \$10.

Proceeds from sales of the 2,000 books are tax deductible, and will go to the Singapore Hospice Council (SHC). This is the umbrella body for providers of hospice and palliative care.

The books are available from HCA Hospice Care, Assisi Hospice, Metta Hospice Care and Dover Park Hospice. Or e-mail the Singapore Hospice Council to order the book at \$45 each, which includes mailing.

The book will be launched on Monday at the National Library.

The photo exhibition of the patients is on from Tuesday to Wednesday at the library.

You can also view pictures online at www.lifebeforedeath.com/departure