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The terminally ill cherish memory of wishes fulfilled



Mr Yong Choon Wee with his children Anders and Angel on an outing at Pandan Reservoir two weeks ago. Mr Yong, who was diagnosed with pulmonary arterial hypertension seven years ago and was given 10 years to live, went on a fishing trip to the Southern Islands with Angel and some friends in June, after his wish was granted by the Rotary My Wish project. ST PHOTO: ALICIA CHAN

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Since 2008, the Rotary My Wish project has helped 110 adults from low-income families



Janice Tai (mailto:jantai@sph.com.sg)

The memory of his 11-year-old daughter Angel, holding on fast to a fishing rod as big sea waves rocked the boat, will stay with Mr Yong Choon Wee for a long time though photos of the trip are lost.

"I was angry when I found out that the photos were gone when I reset my handphone and there was no backup; but later, I realised that I will still remember those moments forever," said Mr Yong, 43.

He had expressed a wish to go on a fishing trip with his daughter in June as part of a community project by the Foundation of Rotary Clubs (Singapore) that seeks to grant the wishes of terminally ill adults.

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Seven years ago, his doctor told him that he had pulmonary arterial hypertension: high blood pressure in the arteries that go from his heart to his lungs.

Back then, the range of medication to treat the condition was limited and it was estimated that he had 10 years to live.

Last year, his condition worsened and he became so breathless that he could not even walk properly.

When he got better this year, his doctor gave the green light for him to go on the fishing trip, and he took his daughter and some friends for a day out to the Southern Islands.

Although he had his portable oxygen tank, he did not need to use it. He could keep his balance on the boat while hooking the bait and teaching his daughter how to reel in a catch. He also regaled her with tales of his past fishing adventures.

"It was my first time out at sea and I was happy to spend time with Dad as he would usually be resting," said Angel shyly.

The Rotary My Wish project was started in 2008 to fulfil the yearnings or aspirations of dying adults. To date, it has helped to fulfil the wishes of 110 adults.

Dr Mark Hon, a Rotary Club member who initiated the project, said: "This all started when I got feedback from medical social workers that the adults have some remaining things they wanted to have or do before they can go in peace, and I thought the project would be meaningful."

While there are various organisations that grant the wishes of critically ill children, those that do so for adults are rare.

Dr Hon said: "We don't think it's frivolous because, compared to children, who may have adults to depend on, the adults are usually the providers and the ones doing the looking after. So when they are not well and their children are young, who is there to help them if there is something they want to do before they go?"

The wishes range from simple items such as wheelchairs, dentures, adult diapers or groceries to outings such as staycations or a day out at a theme park.

Sometimes, the adults ask for something that would come in handy for their surviving family members instead.

Before she died in March this year, Madam Rani Muniandy, 44, who had breast cancer, made a request for the worn-out gas hob in her home to be replaced. It had been sparking and she was worried that an accident would happen while her elderly mother cooked.

"There was some delay in the installation but we knew it was urgent, so that the family can cook and not spend money to cater food when relatives come for prayers after Madam Rani passed away," said Ms Lola Ng, her medical social worker from HCA Hospice Care.

"When the wishes are fulfilled, patients either feel the joy of creating memories or the assurance that their family members have something useful, or they feel grateful for having had a say in deciding what is important to them that needs to be done," she added.

The foundation selects its beneficiaries through referrals from hospitals and hospices. The patients are from low-income families and, in most cases, a doctor has to ascertain that they have less than 12 months to live.

Although many people ask for essential items - as managing a terminal illness can be costly - some experiences arranged through the project have an impact beyond their monetary costs.

"The fishing trip was an experience money can't buy. I treasure every moment that I am well enough to spend with my children and teach them how to grow up properly," said Mr Yong, who stopped working as an IT salesman five years ago.

He and his wife, an administration coordinator, also have a seven-year-old son. He said: "They are still so young. Hopefully, this will leave them some happy memories."

- For more information on the My Wish project, go to <http://rotarymywish.weebly.com/>

