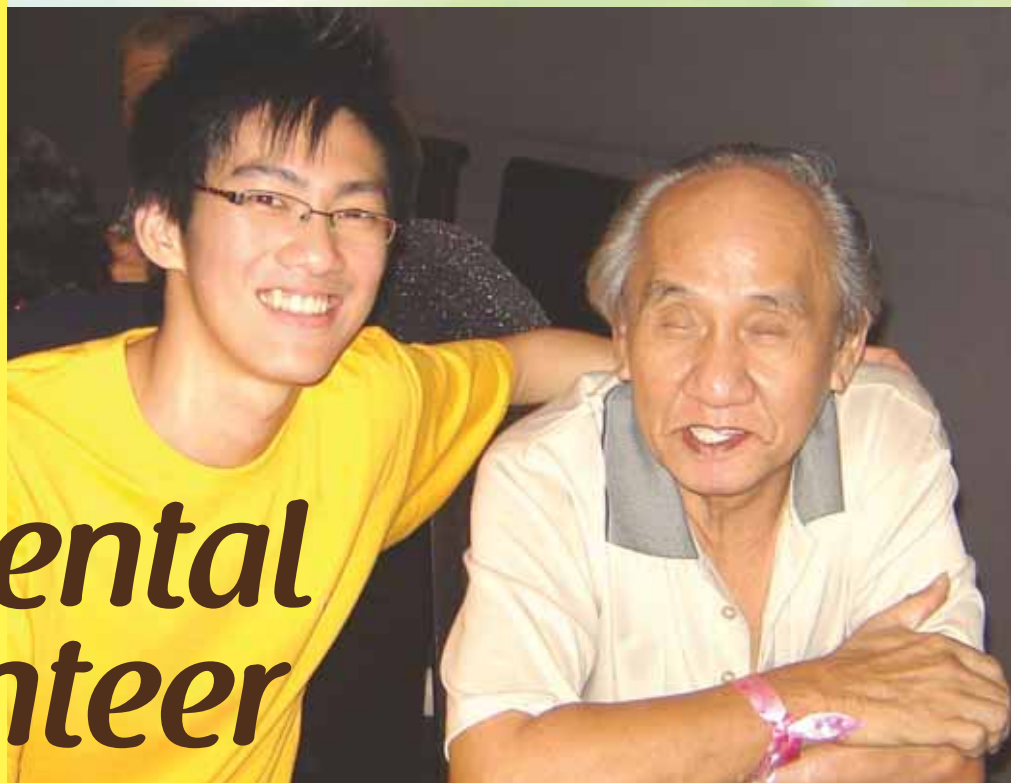


Kevin See tells how he found an unexpected friend when he volunteered with the Elderly programme of **Care Community Services Society (CCSS)**.

THE Accidental Volunteer



“老的，你今天好吗？” (“How are you today, old man?”)

This is the way I greet the old man who sits at table number seven every Saturday morning. And this marks the beginning of another interesting conversation. Whether it's about the absurd rise in oil prices or about Jay Chou's muffled singing, the old man and I can chat about everything under the sky – even the Singapore soccer team winning the World Cup, which we both agree will not happen in our lifetime.

A chit-chat. Nothing unusual, some may say. After all, this is common between good friends. However, how many people can say that they are able to chat with a blind man more than thrice their age and who was a total stranger to them barely a few months ago? This old man lost his eyesight completely some years ago and walks with the help of a walking stick. Ageing has left him with a receding hairline and wrinkles that line his face. When I first saw him, it never occurred to me that we would be enjoying each other's company today.

It started a few months ago, when I was having dinner with my long-time buddy, Soon Ming. He told me that he was coordinating an art and craft session for the elderly which was going to take place that Saturday. Initially, I laughed at the idea, as I was not exactly philanthropic by nature. But my interest was piqued. Soon Ming is a talented artist. Back in school, he was one of the top few Art students, scoring a distinction in the 'A' Levels for his clay model of an egg-shaped car. As for me, my weekends were often spent lazing in bed. Waking up early on a Saturday morning to do volunteer work, in my opinion, would be a miracle that was never going to happen.

But it did. I woke up early that Saturday, much to the astonishment of my parents. It had been tough fighting the part of me that was telling me to go back to sleep. As I walked into the foyer of the building where the art and craft session was held, I was surprised to see many old people gathered together, their hands busy making what seemed to

be photo frames made of ice cream sticks. It was my first time doing volunteer work. "Aiyah, one day only lah!" I thought to myself. I learnt from the seasoned volunteers that the old folks gathered here once a week. It was their way of passing time and also to break away from their loneliness.

Amid the constant chatter between the volunteers and the elderly and the occasional dropping of a packet of ice cream sticks, I spotted this old man who was sitting in a corner with apparently nothing to do. He had his eyes closed, his hands together, and was happily whistling a tune which I could hardly make out from where I was. Anyway it probably was not the latest David Cook song which I have started to hum lately. Nevertheless, I was drawn to the look of tranquility on his face. The person in charge of the CCSS Elderly Dept told me that this man was the only blind person among all the elderly. I nodded in silence as I tried to picture what life without colours would be like, living in total darkness.

I was curious and wanted to speak to this interesting character. I took a chair and sat down beside him. Of course he couldn't see that I was new to this place, but he found my voice unfamiliar. We started to make small talk, asking simple questions and sharing a little about ourselves. It was a light-hearted conversation. When we had nothing to say, we talked about the weather. However, it struck me that throughout the short and simple conversation, the generation gap was absent. So much so that I did not even realise that we had talked for 3 hours! At the end of it, I led the man to the CCSS van that had just arrived to take the elderly folks home after the session.

That day, I felt different. I was impressed. I realised why I was able to click with this old blind man instantly. He was no ordinary old blind man. He was unique. I have come across many people his age

who are still stubbornly holding onto their beliefs and superstitions. In contrast, he was open-minded and receptive to my views, and constantly shared his personal anecdotes with me. For a blind man, his general knowledge was noteworthy and he kept abreast of current affairs.

His attitude towards life is something I esteem and hold in high regard. He was not born blind. He gradually lost his eyesight several years ago. Anyone in his shoes would have been devastated. If I were in his place, I probably would have lost the will to live. But being blind did not make him a weaker person. Instead, it made him stronger. He is now more appreciative of the things and people around him. A proud man, he does not seek to win our sympathy and neither does he allow anyone to look down on him. In just a few hours, he had already left a deep impression in my mind. This was why I went back to CCSS the following Saturday.

This unexpected friendship grew over the next few months. In the old man's own words, I have effectively replaced his walking stick. He trusts me to take him where he wants to go and he can recognize my voice even when I'm far away. He has become an old friend of mine (literally!). Today, I make it a point to get up early on Saturdays. It's something we both look forward to each week, and I must say that he has influenced my life in a big way.

This blind man Mr Tan Hong Nam, and he is 65 this year. I am 21. Some Saturday mornings, I still feel the inertia and am tempted to go back to sleep, but recently, Mr Tan told me something that made me feel really good. He said that he had been feeling much happier lately. And that he was glad to have met me, for I have made a difference in his life.

That alone makes it all worthwhile.