

### CAPTIVATED

**Encounters that Challenge, Nurture, and Inspire** 

COLLEGE OF ALICE & PETER TAN

National University of Singapore

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Captivated is a collection of stories by our student writers to create a window for you to experience the learning that takes place at the College of Alice & Peter Tan (CAPT). CAPT is a residential college for about 600 undergraduates from the different faculties at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Established in 2012, CAPT embraces the idea of "living and learning" - with formal and informal approaches to holistic education. Our college has as our theme "Active Citizenship and Community Engagement" and thus many of our academic modules (including our Capstone Experience), reading groups, volunteer efforts, local community outreach and overseas trips are designed to spur our students in that direction.

We invited our students to reflect on their learning journeys about "Active Citizenship and Community Engagement" by writing about a person, an idea or an organization that they had met here while at CAPT, and the lessons learnt as they followed up and interacted with the people and community.

Just as the students have been challenged, inspired, and nurtured by their personal encounters, we hope that you too will be impacted through a change of perspective, be inspired to get to know one of these communities better, or be motivated to discover new communities unlike your own to achieve a new and deeper understanding.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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The College is also deeply grateful for the generous support provided by Mrs Alice Tan and family toward enhancing the living and learning programmes in CAPT, and providing financial assistance for students.

Finally, we thank our students who have written these essays so that their encounters may be shared with others.



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### LISTENING FIRST



Photo Courtesy of CELINE ONG

hen we first set out on this *Capstone* project, we went forth like adventurers conquering a new land. We set out, eyes gleaming with idealism and heroism, looking to transplant well-planned solutions from the classroom and our own lives to the foreign terrain of our target community, Henderson, a little neighbourhood with rental flats. We had spoken to many different community stakeholders about our plan to initiate a series of character-building workshops targeted at the many latchkey children who hung around the area. Fattened on their endorsement and our own confidence, we reached Henderson that first day, ready to succeed.

But success, as we had defined it at the time, seemed to elude us from the start. At the opening party that we held for the children and parents, none of the networking and bonding we had envisioned came to fruition. Instead, I found myself contending with rowdy boys binding each other up with duct tape and gagging each other with fries. Our programme was pushed back because of the impromptu performance that one of the residents had the kids do for us, and even after that, we could not get the kids to come together in an orderly fashion to play any games. It was a failure, and our team left defeated.

This first incident was a blessing in how it opened my eyes to the assumptions I had held in my approach to community service. I began to notice how keenly I had expected the world to reflect myself. The reason we had been "defeated" was not because of the children and their rowdiness, or the mess in our schedule; rather, we had planned a programme with ourselves in mind, expecting kids with our penchant for order and rules, our trust for authority, our shyness with strangers — but these kids were different, a product of a different environment and different circumstances, and thus we had to proceed differently.

These lessons repeated themselves over and over each week. In one of the lessons we conducted early on, we had decided to work with the girls on life goals and their inspiration. To be precise, we wanted the girls to draw pictures of their heroes, and explain how they were inspired by them.

"Okay, let's draw the heroes in our lives! Who's your hero?" I smiled warmly, hoping to cajole a suitable response from Farra\*. When she gave me a blank stare, I changed my tactic. "I mean, what would you like to be when you grow up?" My question fell flat, bulldozed by her silence again.

"A ...teacher? A doctor? Do you like to dance?" I thought she might be having trouble understanding me, and hoped that by listing the examples I would stimulate a response. And it worked! "Policeman", she whispered. I was ecstatic and exploded forth in a multitude of encouraging questions, "Ohhhh, okay! That's really cool! What do you like about policemen? Do you like their uniforms? Do you like what they do? They keep us safe from bad guys, right?" Farra looked right at me, sighed and said, "Dunno."



We, as community builders, are change-makers, not because we know better, but because we take the time to listen.

Conversations like this left me frustrated but thoughtful. I began to wonder why I had assumed that children would have career goals ready for stating, or why I was so intent on eliciting one from her. In hindsight, I realised that what we had planned as a simple task was in fact something really difficult for the children. We were asking the kids what they wanted to be, and expecting idealistic answers which we could easily work with as goals we could motivate them towards. But for these kids, many of them just didn't know what was out there for them. They didn't have the exposure to the books and movies I'd had when I was young, and most of what they knew was from their immediate community – their parents, caretakers, relatives, and friends who were in jail or had dropped out of school. To Farra and her friends, the idea of becoming a doctor or lawyer was probably not even understood as legitimate career goals. Farra was probably racking her mind really hard to choose something she knew was respectable and attainable, and which would get the approval of myself, and her friends.

Furthermore, for these kids, their life lessons and understanding of the world come to them blunt and raw, with no delicate storyteller to point out learning points and direct their conclusions of good and bad. Their narratives are often woven from the views of others, especially angry parents and frustrated caretakers, which lead them to feel like there isn't much to value in themselves.

Taking all these into consideration, I dispensed with the questions that I found irrelevant and began to ask more simply about her everyday life instead. This led to an impactful conversation in which I realised more about Farra's situation and family. I learnt that she was no longer attending school, simply because she had skipped it a few days with some friends from the neighbourhood and was too embarrassed to return. She didn't see the use in returning either. Although that session did not end in some heroic feat of convincing Farra to return to school, we both changed a little that day, simply through the sharing of our lives. That was the moment I learnt to let go of the need to see results and change things for the better, and realised the importance of simple presence and availability.

My Capstone experience in Henderson was an exercise in reflection. The prism of Henderson refracted my experience, forcing me out of the safety of 'neutrality' and making my myriad biases impossible to ignore. I began to see better my privileged worldview, and that in turn armed me to be a better listener, and a more resourceful community builder. That said, I have realised that community work is not about smart solutions, or best practices, or even about good planning. In the end, it comes down to pure, unadulterated hard effort in perfecting the art of being present. At the end of the Capstone, the neat videos, worksheets and games might have faded away, but what stays and effects change in the long term is the transformation which comes from a relationship and a good experience with someone. We, as community builders, are change-makers, not because we know better, but because we take the time to listen.

\*This name has been changed to protect the identity of the person.



#### Celine Ong

Celine Ong graduated from NUS in 2016 with a degree in Linguistics. At CAPT, Celine, along with four teammates, read the *Capstone Experience* module. Her project was entitled *Henderson Heroes*, which focused on conducting a mentoring programme for youth in the Henderson estate. She would like to thank Beyond Social Services and T-Net Club @ Bukit Merah for their support in the project. She treasures her CAPT years for giving her transformative friendships, deeper self-knowledge, and teaching her humility in service.

### TAKE A PHOTO OF YOUR MEDICINE



Photo Courtesy of JANICE GOH

o to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, 'We have done this ourselves.'" - Lao Tzu

Jalan Batu is a cosy neighbourhood with a majority of elderly residents living in 3-room flats. A number live alone, refusing to move in with their families due to the familiarity of the place. To meet the needs of the elderly there,

Friends @St Hilda's was set up to provide various outreach social services. Our staff advisor at CAPT put us in touch with Mrs Quek Ai Siew, the Vice Chairman of Friends @St Hilda's, who had approached him about a problem that the Centre was facing regarding medication needs among their elderly clients.

"We are faced with the elderly who are not compliant with their medication. Confusion over numerous medications and/or the physical inability to pack medications into daily/weekly dosages are the two major causes of medication non-compliance among the elderly residents. A third reason for non-compliance is the decline in memory that leads to the elderly forgetting to take their medications." Ai Siew went on to explain that Friends @ St Hilda's staff are not healthcare professionals. Therefore, they are not permitted by regulations to pack medication into daily/weekly dosages. "I am worried that the elderly may not always know what they are taking," Ai Siew told us with deep concern, "We would like to know what can be done to help our elderly be compliant with their medications." And thus, our team of CAPT students were tasked with finding a solution for their residents' medication needs.

The problem was multifactorial. Being enterprising university students, we cracked our heads and brainstormed as many solutions as we could, thinking we knew best what to do. To understand the elderly better, we did spring cleaning for them in preparation for Chinese New Year and went down weekly to join them in various activities, some of which we helped to facilitate. We learnt a lot about their lives, but none of our efforts made us understand their lifestyles and medication habits better. We were eager to come up with a solution, but each time we brainstormed for ideas, we would find loopholes in each idea. This went on for many weeks until we decided that we needed to listen to the elderly first. Finally, one of our group members came up with the idea of teaching the elderly to document their lifestyle - eating and social habits - via photography.

We borrowed a few digital cameras and began teaching basic photography to some of the elderly residents. We gave instructions to take pictures of their daily meals, who they ate with, and their normal activities (e.g. morning exercise) for a week. A week later, we met with them to review the photos as a group. We used the photos as a means of interviewing the residents to understand more about their health and medication habits.

The elderly residents were sold on the idea! "What does this button do?" "I want to take a selfie!" "Teach me!" The residents eagerly asked us questions about their new cameras. For many, this was their first encounter with a digital camera, but they were ready to learn. "I shall go home to show my children what I can do now," one participant remarked at the end of the workshop session.

By the next week, we had over a hundred photos from the ten residents who participated in the workshop. The residents enthusiastically shared their lives with us through the photos.

"These are my medications. I arrange them nicely in this box here every day." It is important for me to eat my medications daily. Otherwise I might get a stroke and no longer be able to take care of myself," one resident told me as she shared her photos, pointing to her own makeshift medication box that meticulously separated out her chronic medicines from her acute medicines. "This is the food centre most of us eat at. Cooking at home for two is very troublesome," she then exclaimed as she moved on to another photo. The whole group nodded in unison. Eating out as a more convenient option seemed to be the consensus.



Solving the problem of medication compliance was not just about educating the residents on how to take their medications appropriately, but also how to encourage them to form meaningful friendships that help motivate them to take better care of themselves

A loving husband expressed his concerns about taking care of his wife who had dementia, "I have to undergo dialysis three times a week and inject insulin, but it is not painful. I am more concerned about my wife who has to eat chicken rice every day."

Then, another highly energetic and cheerful auntie told me, before proceeding to ask me how to take a selfie, "These are my tai chi friends! I look forward to spending time with them every morning."

Through the photography project we managed to identify some key barriers to their health. From our findings, we wrote a report that we shared with Friends @St Hilda's to help in their operations.

We found that the residents were not simply lazy or confused about their medication. Many of them actually knew what they were taking. Instead, compliance depended on their level of motivation. A healthy motivation to comply with medication was associated with good family relationships as well as strong social networks within the neighbourhood. "Her health has greatly improved since we managed to convince her to come down for the Centre's activities daily," Ai Siew beamed as she introduced us to one of her first clients. "Are you happy here?" I asked. "I am," came a satisfied reply from the elderly lady. Solving the problem of medication compliance was not just about educating the residents on how to take their medications appropriately, but also how to encourage them to form meaningful friendships that help motivate them to take better care of themselves.

Through our project we learned to listen to the people first so that we may understand their needs. By doing so, we were able to more accurately identify the problem and propose better solutions for the Centre. Their issue was not one of medication compliance but rather therapeutic compliance where the elderly needed to learn to lead healthy lifestyles, in addition to taking medication. Indeed, to fulfil our module requirement we could have done a project based on what we thought was right and done well, but it would not have benefitted the Centre in the long term. By simply providing a listening ear and a creative means for the residents to share their lives with us, we were able to identify what the problem

truly was, aiding the Centre in finding long-term solutions to improve their residents'

quality of life.

#### Janice Goh

Janice Goh graduated from NUS in 2016 with a degree in Pharmacy. She served as the Active Community Engagement (ACE) Director and is widely known for coming up with the ACE mascot - the ACE giraffe - whose motto is "Down to earth but always looking out for others." She participated in the Capstone Experience module entitled Pharmacy in Community with four teammates, a diverse mix from Pharmacy, Arts and Business departments. CAPT has taught her that the causes she champions can partner her own professional career and there is no need to exclusively separate the two.

### **SEEING WITH** NEW FYES



Photo Credit: CAPTURE

he children steal sometimes," the man said in a matter-of-fact voice. "We can't take care of the entire shop all the time. So sometimes they come, they grab things, they go."

My partner and I exchanged glances. Well, this was certainly unexpected. After hearing that, I wondered what further questions we could possibly ask. I sighed. Somehow, this was not quite the rosy image I had had when I first joined the Social Innovation Wing.

"We solve real-life problems with sustainable, innovative solutions," they had said. The problem was I had forgotten to envision the part where we would have to do the actual investigation of the problem. And well, problems were problems because they were messy, and there was no single cause that you could ever focus on.

After what seemed to me like an eternity of awkward silence, my partner prodded the mama shop owner further. "What do they normally take?" she asked. He shrugged, "Drinks. When they're playing, they get thirsty, they want drinks but cannot afford to buy. So they come and take."

Was this getting us anywhere at all?



The truth is, these communities have assets and strengths of their own which did not even occur to us to look for.

Suffice to say, I was starting to become frustrated. Our task was to walk around the HDB estate that we had chosen and carry out asset mapping – essentially, we were to figure out the strengths and problems of the community. All I saw from these conversations, however, were more and more problems. And while it evoked my sympathy as well as a profound gratitude for the sheltered life I had lived, I had absolutely no idea how we were going to effect change.

I might as well have been a statue in that conversation, for the little I was able to contribute to it. My more skilled partner, however, knew what sorts of questions to ask to get the information we needed. "What about the adults, then?" she inquired. "Do you face the same problem with them?"

"Them?" the shop owner scoffed. "They don't steal. They too old. No, they come and buy on credit, and promise to pay back later."

"Do they pay you back?" my partner pushed.

"Sometimes," he allowed. "But while they paying back ah, they buy new things, so the amount they owe goes back up. Like that they might as well not pay what."

"Sometimes they die," his wife chipped in. "They all very old ah."

As a couple of customers arrived, we decided to take our leave. Before we left, we decided to buy some soft drinks – the man had tried to help us, and the least we could do was to contribute to his already limited pool of paying customers.

As we walked away, my partner pulled out her phone, and began typing out notes from the encounter. "So," she murmured, "Needs of the community are pretty easy to talk about – it's just the same issue of urban poverty we've been seeing over and over again." She then looked up at me. "What are your thoughts on that, though?"

I shrugged, and racked my brain for something positive to say. I might have felt a sense of discontent, but I certainly was not going to allow it to show. "Well, I guess it's good that they can trust the members of the community enough to let them buy things on credit. Oh, and the community members trust them back," I added, recalling the portion of conversation we had overheard as we left. "They take the shop owners' word for how much they owe."

"I'll enter that under assets, then," she replied, typing it in. As we walked to find another person to talk to, that conversation stayed with me. Yes, we had indeed encountered yet another negative aspect to the community, but

there was a positive undertone as well. They had a sense of togetherness and belonging as one neighbourhood, and that was something powerful that we could work with

Indeed, through future brainstorming sessions and more walks through the community, the little spark that I had witnessed from that one conversation grew to an almost grudging respect, and from there, it blossomed to admiration. Somehow, these people had managed to hold on to the kampong spirit of togetherness that is lost in many parts of Singapore indeed, the extent of my own interactions with my neighbours include nothing more than polite nods and smiles stretched thin, if they even appeared at all.

If there was one thing I took away from my involvement in the Social Innovation Wing, or even the experience of asset mapping, it was the realisation that it is all too easy to look upon a group as being in need of our help and that we are somehow liberators who have come to brighten up their lives. The truth is, these communities have assets and strengths of their own which did not even occur to us to look for. There are multiple facets to everything, and I have learnt to look for all of them – not just the ones which my preconceived notions made easy to see at first glance.



#### Shriya Sriram

Shriya Sriram, a Psychology major, participated in the Social Innovation Wing, a student group which sees value in the relationships between communities, and encourages innovative thinking when finding solutions to existing social problems. She continues to contribute her creative talent to Wild Things, an initiative that aims to enhance the vibrancy of the arts scene in CAPT.

### **MY DRAWINGS** ARE UGLY

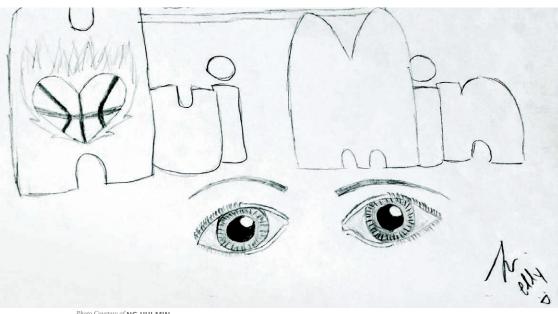


Photo Courtesy of NG HUI MIN

T t was already the second session of my team's Capstone project, Youth with Vision 3.0, but the class was still very rowdy and unmanageable. L Being the Programme Director, I wondered if the project, of which I had a big part in planning, was not well conceptualised. We did our literature review to consolidate the best practices and incorporated them into our plan. But I wondered, why wasn't it turning out as well as we had expected?

As the invited speaker began to tell his story to the group, the core team could finally take a backseat for a moment. My mind took advantage of the break, drawing me into rumination.

The intuitive right brain guestioned the rational left brain: "What was the purpose of having this programme in the first place?"

In a logical manner, my left brain responded, "Well, the purpose was to implement the idea of mentorship among youth in order to inspire them through our motivational activities. Of course, that fulfills the Capstone Experience component in CAPT, too."

The Youth with Vision 3.0 mentorship programme matched NUS undergraduates with students from a nearby secondary school. These secondary students were identified as the "sandwiched youth", that is, youth who neither qualified for the school's enrichment programme nor for remedial classes. There was a lack of service for this group of youth, and by pairing them with mentors, we hoped to create a community engagement experience, through the provision of a platform for each involved community to share their strengths and learn from each other.

However, my right brain was not satisfied, "But is the mentorship and what we are doing really inspiring them? Are they recognizing their value in this community?"

"According to the literature, it should," The left brain answered sheepishly after scanning the environment to see a chaotic and disengaged class.

The left and right brain debate shook my confidence in the best practices I had believed would work. I was disappointed in the progress of the programme, but we were barely halfway through it. I had to reaffirm my confidence in our plans, so I turned to the Vice Project Director, who was seated beside me to get a more positive perspective.

"Do you think that what we are doing is meaningful?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrow and his eyes subconsciously slanted to the top left corner, a sign of him giving some thought to my question.

I stared at him, anticipating a response.

"Well..." he muttered. Then, there was silence. I suppose he was as uncertain about it as I was.

Before he could give a response, the applause of the students broke the awkward silence and signaled the end of the speaker's motivational talk.

The team was back at the frontline, but the guestion remained at the back of my mind while I conducted the rest of the session that day.



#### I learnt that the value of mentorship is to show sufficient interest and give that personal touch to the life of someone else.

Finally, it was the end of our second session. After the students left, the core team had a debrief with the mentors to identify areas for improvement and other notable matters.

Similar issues of student management and unruly mentees surfaced during the conversation. As Programme Director, I was busy running the activities and thus was not assigned any mentees. But I had to find out the problems underlying the dysfunctional mentorships. So, the following week, at our third session, I personally observed the mentor-mentee relationships in an attempt to determine what was not working.

The session was on goal-setting. While the class was working on the goalsetting activity, I walked around to see if there were any problematic cases that I could address. A hand waved at me to signal for my presence. I darted to their table, and found a guiet girl seated to the side, away from her group.

I greeted her warmly and introduced myself before sitting next to her. She forced a smile and remained quiet. I then prompted her for her name, and asked if she understood the activity's instructions. She shyly replied with a nod.

As she opened up her journal to a fresh page for the goal setting activity, I noticed that her journal was full of drawings and sketches, unlike most of the other students whose words were their main form of expression. I saw a good chance to break the ice.

"Do you like drawing?" I asked.

"Yes, but I'm not good at it. My drawings are ugly." She said dejectedly. I was not surprised by her response, because most of the youth in the programme

came with low confidence. I recalled the previous week's session where many of them were hesitant to visualise their future; even sharing which secondary school institution they had wanted to attend was challenging.

"Before you say that, why don't you show me your drawings first?" I encouraged her. She handed me her journal. As I flipped through it, I saw the anticipation in her eyes from my peripheral view. My gut feeling told me that this was a transformable moment that I should seize. Hence, I decided to play on her strength in hopes of building her self-efficacy.

"This cat you drew here is so pretty. Can you show me how to draw it so I can learn?" I asked.

She happily took two pencils from her slightly tattered pink pencil case. After giving me one of them, she started her tutorial on cat drawing and patiently guided me (I really can't draw). We had small exchanges throughout the process and it was obvious that she became more comfortable in sharing her thoughts and feelings gradually.

The 45-minutes goal-setting activity was soon coming to an end and I had to return to the front of the class to conduct the next activity. Before I stepped away from her workstation, she asked if she could sketch a picture of me in her journal so she could remember me. My heart melted. I smiled and nodded at her before I walked to my usual spot in front of the class.

The tug at my heartstrings gave me an epiphany on the guestion that had been at the back of my mind – Has Youth with Vision 3.0 been meaningful? While I still guestioned if this programme had been meaningful for every individual involved. I was comforted that at least for that one girl whom

I deeply interacted with, it might have been. I learnt that the value of mentorship is to show sufficient interest and give that personal touch to the life of someone else.

#### Ng Hui Min

Ng Hui Min graduated from NUS in May 2016 with a degree in Psychology. At CAPT, Hui Min read the Capstone Experience module with five teammates. Her project was entitled Youth with Vision 3.0, which focused on conducting a motivational mentorship programme for youth at a local secondary school. She was humbled by the journey walking with the community partners and is grateful for the inspiring life lessons from CAPT.

# WE ARE NOT THAT DIFFERENT AFTER ALL



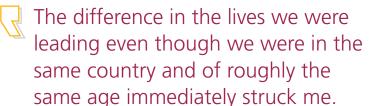
Photo Credit: CAPTUR

can die tomorrow or next week. No sure. Who knows?" said the 24-year-old with a steely expression. I looked him in the eyes and knew he was not exaggerating. Not many people that age consider their mortality on a daily basis but for many foreign construction workers like Wahid, injury and death are worries that they face in their bid to escape a life seemingly worse in their home country.

I met Wahid on a walkabout of Little India as part of a programme by HealthServe, an organisation that seeks to assist and empower migrant workers in Singapore. I was introduced to HealthServe through the CAPT's Hidden Communities module. Wahid's story is not unlike the thousands of foreign workers who come into Singapore every year. Leaving behind his family and friends in rural Chennai, Wahid paid an agent five thousand Singapore dollars to get a job as a construction worker in Singapore. His family had sold their land and taken loans to accumulate the relatively colossal amount of money needed for Wahid to work in Singapore. However, they had no other choice. "Father have chicken farm. No enough money come from there. Bank asking for money back which father take to buy chicken. But no enough so he sell all," recounted Wahid. With whatever leftover resources and money borrowed from friends and family, Wahid's family pinned all their hopes onto the young man and sent him almost three thousand kilometers away to a foreign country that no one in their village had ever heard of before.

What is different about his story is his age. While many of the foreign workers in Singapore arrive in their late twenties with some coming in as old as 40, Wahid's young age was a stark contrast. "I [was] 17 years [old] but paper say 21 when I first come. I no look so old!" Wahid confessed with a sheepish grin. His nonchalance now starkly contrasted with the emotions he had experienced at the time. Shouldering the hopes of his family and shackled down by the massive debt they had taken to give him this opportunity, Wahid recalled the anxiety and pressure to send money back home. "Work very hard but no enough food. Need to send money home so cannot waste. At home, big money problem," said Wahid, but for the first time, his voice trailed off and he looked away.

We took a break from talking and walked down to a coffee shop for a drink. There was silence for a while and then Wahid softly spoke, "No enough money for sister wedding. Man say cannot wait long. I feel my fault." The thought of his sister remaining unmarried because of him left him anxious and on the verge of depression. He recounted frequent sleepless nights and cold sweats that left him feeling drained and exhausted, even before he started his day of rigorous work. Sensing that I had been moved by his plight, he consoled, "It's okay. I sending money more now so sister marriage fine."



At this point, the enormity of the challenges he had faced and was still facing hit home. Nestled among the many nondescript coffee shops of Little India, we sat a metre apart, similar in age and country of origin but lives lived worlds apart. On the one hand, there was Wahid burdened by the sacrifices his family had made, as well as the guilt of what they were going through as a result. As if that was not enough, he was ejected from all sense of familiarity and was sent away to a strange land of foreign languages where he had to toil under the sun for hours, six days a week. On the other hand, there was me whose main worries in life were waking up in time for school and passing exams, trivial and inconsequential issues compared to what Wahid was going through. The difference in the lives we were leading even though we were in the same country and of roughly the same age immediately struck me.

"So when are you getting married?" I asked in an attempt to steer the conversation towards a lighter topic. Wahid broke out in laughter and replied, "24 too young! I wait till [I am] 27 [or] 28 then I go back home and find. Here I no want girlfriend," as he gestured that it was expensive.



Photo Credit: CAPTURE

I personally understood his sentiments and was reminded of his youthful innocence that had all but been lost to the stresses of his life. Underneath his hardened exterior and skin bronzed by hours under the sun, Wahid was after all, a 24-year-old man who had arrived seven years earlier as a boy, far too young for the hardships in store for him but propelled by the necessity of money needed to support his family.

"I got phone call. You wait," Wahid hastily said as he answered his phone. He broke out into a wide smile and spoke in an unfamiliar language, but I overhead the word "Amma" meaning mother in Tamil. He gestured profusely and was animated throughout the conversation. He giggled and laughed as he heard this familiar voice over the phone. His eyes welled up; however, his tone did not change so as to not give her any reason to worry. My phone vibrated and the words "Mama" flashed on the screen.

I could not help but laugh at the coincidence. I realised that despite the vast difference in the magnitude of the struggles we both face, we are not that different after all.

#### Navkaran Singh

Navkaran Singh, a medical student, spent a larger part of his years in CAPT attending Master's Tea sessions and engaging in modules such as *Hidden Communities*, where he was introduced to HealthServe. From these experiences, he has had the privilege to meet thoughtful leaders in a wide range of fields and to learn from diverse groups of people not visible to mainstream society. He greatly treasures these experiences and aims to use the knowledge gained to make a difference.

# A LETTER TO A (RIEND) / (OREIGN) DOMESTIC WORKER

I know you will never read this and I am not even sure if I am writing this for you or for myself, or for anyone out there to read and try to understand the relationship we created in a span of four weeks and some. Every Friday morning, I looked forward to seeing you and all the other women from the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME). Before our first meeting, I nervously ran through all the possible talking points in my head. In my mind, there was a fear that looming, awkward silences would ensue at our meeting; a fear provoked by the belief that we had nothing in common. I, a 20-year-old university student born and brought up in the so called First World and you, a 23-year-old married mother taking on the additional identity of a migrant worker from the developing world - What could we possibly have in common?

You had the same dreams and aspirations as I did, of an adolescent woman looking to build a future.

I won't paint a perfect picture by lying and saying that we bonded instantly. I remember the first hour of our meeting when you and your friends glanced at me nervously. I could sense that you felt threatened by me, as I held a notebook and aggressively took notes as if I was trying to document your every move. I can't blame you for not understanding that I was only doing that so as not to forget these crucial introductions needed for my reflection. I also can't blame you for the initial animosity because your past experiences in Singapore would hardly lead you to trust us Singaporeans, for we have treated you in a less than humane manner. Your mistrust was guided by the looks you had received on our streets, labelled more as a foreign nuisance than a loving care-giver who had given up your life at home to come look after us. I say again, who could blame you?

However, within the first hour, I was disrupted by a frantic phone call from my mother wondering if my morning alarm had awoken me in time for this meeting. I responded in my mother-tongue, Hindi, and in a quick moment, I saw the expression on your face transform into a gleeful smile. Therein lay our first commonality - language. Not to be overly dramatic, but Nelson Mandela's words struck me at that moment,

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

The last hour had been spent talking to you in English, a language you definitely understood, yet comprehension and expression can be miles apart. It struck me that this wasn't just a struggle you faced today. You and your employer must have faced the same distance created by communication in a language that was new to you, yet one that you were expected to take directions in, with the promptness of a high-speed rail. After a quick clarification that I did in fact speak Hindi, you provided me with a flurry of information about yourself as I attempted to take it all in. I first gasped when I heard that you had a six-month-old son back home, and then again when you told me you were a university graduate! You told me about your favourite film and that you visited the gurdwara [Sikh place of worship]

every day back home. We talked for a while longer, before it was time for you to go back to the shelter, but you made me promise I would come back next Friday.

Friday morning dawned and I was woken up again by my mother's call, worried yet again that the alarm clock would have no effect on me - she knows me so well. This time though, I was left wondering if your mother ever called you to wake you up, or if you would ever be able to spend time getting to know your son as my mother knew me. At today's meeting, the atmosphere was jovial. I had become a familiar face. However, the trust that was growing between us also meant that I got to know more about your life here in Singapore, not just the stories from back home. I learnt of the exploitation you had faced at the hands of your employer. You showed me the scars, emotional and physical. Your accounts made me loathe the human race. How could someone have done this to a fellow human being? You told me that my shock was uncalled for because after all, you were only a maid. Oh, how I hated that archaic word. You were a domestic worker – a woman with a full-time job in the labor market. You were a breadwinner. You were an independent woman seeking employment just like any other, and you should not have expected any less when it came to your safety and well-being. Yet, you were told to expect less. From your agent, from your employer, from the government, from society - you were expected to earn less, to be fed less, to be treated as lesser.



### Jeet, you were a foreign domestic worker to many, but a friend to me.

Four weeks later, I realized that we had so much more in common than our language. You had the same dreams and aspirations as I did, of an adolescent woman looking to build a future. The shelter told me that you had left a few months ago because you were not able to get another employment contract in Singapore. You had told me that you spent your

life's savings in hopes of coming to Singapore, and I am sorry that my sunny little island fell short of your expectations. I am sorry that you were met with unkindness. But I am also hopeful that the time you spent in the shelter helped in some way in rebuilding your ability to trust. I can only expect that you are missing HOME, a space carved out on our tiny island to help restore you and your friends to a better life. A few months later, as I write this letter to you, I am hoping that when you think of Singapore, you also keep me in your memories. Jeet, you were a foreign domestic worker to many, but a friend to me. Keep smiling.

Love and respect,

#### Sovereigna

A version of this story was first published on the IOM X blog at http://iomx.org/2774-2/ in August 2016.



#### Sovereigna Lakhotia

Sovereigna Lakhotia is a Global Studies major with a strong interest in issues of human rights and development. At CAPT, Sovereigna read the Capstone Experience module, which enabled her to engage in volunteering and advocacy for migrant worker welfare and rights in Singapore through organizations like HOME. Her time at CAPT has connected her with like-minded socially aware students, inspiring NGO leaders and dedicated academics. She hopes to take her knowledge and experiences from CAPT to make a change in communities after graduation.

### MORE THAN A SHELTER



ear Jennifer,

Thank you for granting me this opportunity to learn from you once again. I stepped into Dayspring New Life Centre, armed with a notebook and a list of prepared questions. However, nothing could have prepared me for the learning I was about to receive.

When I arrived at your Centre, the place had a tranquility that belied the difficulties that its clients were facing. As I spoke to you, I realised that this facade of tranquility seemed like a further reflection of the women themselves, whose emotional turmoil was usually unnoticeable from the surface.

I was surprised to learn that the majority of your clients were non-residential. My surprise deepened when you requested that Dayspring New Life Centre not be described as a "shelter". All this while, I was under the notion that Dayspring was a shelter for women with unsupported pregnancies. I was unaware that such a term was a disservice to the work that your Centre does every day to serve women with unsupported pregnancies. In fact, the philosophy of the Centre that you shared - "the rest of their future is not with us; what happens after us?" - resonated with me as a social work student. Thus, your Centre provides a suite of services that include looking to external systems for help, building emotional capacity, connecting clients to various resources, and even following up for two years to help clients transition towards self-reliance. The residential service is just a part of that extensive package. Therefore, simply calling the Centre a "shelter" belittles its mission.

We have to educate ourselves, and, as you so aptly put it, regardless of our training, find a way to connect to the issue.

The mission "to empower women and families with unsupported pregnancies to make life-giving choices" impressed me greatly. It taught me that one should move from the debate about abortion and focus instead

on helping women make an informed choice. Very often, women feel pressured into whichever choice they eventually make, citing reasons such as finances, career advancement and, sometimes, shame. However, your Centre's work in helping these women access information and resources focuses on helping people and giving them choices. Such empowerment would seem to be more useful than engaging in an endless debate.

As a student, it would be easy for me to get sucked into such a debate. Thank you for helping me be aware of what students like me can do instead. In our capacity as people whose main occupation is to learn, we would do well to learn that the issue of unsupported pregnancies is not a simple one; instead, it is broad and diverse. For instance, it is important to understand that there are underlying issues to the pregnancy, and that there are overarching societal systems at play, such as the ease of accessibility to abortion, or that it is not just a teenage issue, but one that includes broader demographics. Furthermore, when talking about the effects of abortion, it is important to recognize that they affect not just the child, but at minimum both the mother and the child, and finally, that there are other parties such as the family that can all play a part in perpetuating the cycle of unsupported pregnancies. We have to educate ourselves, and, as you so aptly put it, regardless of our training, find a way to connect to the issue.

I felt that a way to connect to the issue was by finding out how the Centre had started and the lessons you had learnt. Listening to your story and journey to Dayspring New Life Centre and how you became its founder and Director, I was enthralled. It was amazing how you began to receive signs that made your calling to start an organization for unsupported pregnancies clearer. It seemed as if the universe was aligning itself to create a space for your current work. For example, the two previous shelters for women with unsupported pregnancies redirected their efforts to other needs, and through your book, Walking Out of Secret Shame, you were connected to many people who were passionate about the issue and wanted to help. You even managed to meet a Member of Parliament who then connected you to Dayspring. I asked you what you had learnt from the whole process and you told me that you could not have done it alone. Even a visionary needs a community to make her vision a reality. That was an important lesson, but to me, there was a more valuable one when you said you were

grateful for the struggles. It made me realise that we have to appreciate the process of growth we have to endure, even if it is sometimes a slow and arduous one.



### Even a visionary needs a community to make her vision a reality.

Beyond those lessons learnt, the thing that struck me the most was your comment on one of the low points in the journey. You were working on a press release at a previous media and communications job and you asked yourself then, "Whose life is going to change because of this [press release]?" Your guestion struck me because I am seeking to do something meaningful in my life as well. I felt that it was an important guestion that serves as a reminder of our role as fellow human beings to help each other, especially those in need.

When I stepped outside after our talk, the sky had just turned from overcast to clear. It seemed a fitting metaphor for how the Centre transforms the lives of its clients. I am grateful for having had this opportunity to find out more about the issue of unsupported pregnancies and I wish you all the best in the good work you are doing.

Yours sincerely. **Jordan Tang** 



#### Jordan Tang

Jordan Tang, a Social Work major, served on the Freshman Orientation Camp Organizing Committee, the Garuda Neighbourhood Committee at CAPT, and organised the first CAPT Human Library while on the Academic Committee for the CAPT Student Symposium 2016 (CAPTISS). Jordan read the Family in a Changing Singapore module, which introduced him to Ms Jennifer Heng, former Director of Dayspring New Life Centre and the work the organization does to empower women and families of unsupported pregnancies. These experiences in CAPT have given him the chance to foster conversations between people of diverse backgrounds and he hopes to have more of such opportunities.

### ENGAGING YOUTH WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



Photo Courtesy of WONG ENMIN

ack in 2014, my fascination with animal-assisted therapy had led me to the grounds of EQUAL CLG, an organisation that helps vulnerable youth through a philosophy of equine-assisted learning. My short stint ended when the students I worked with completed the programme. Thankfully, our paths crossed again a year later in my second year at CAPT. It was there that I first met J\* and his mother at a dialogue session with EQUAL CLG at CAPT. J is in the Temasek Cares-EQUATE programme, a sixmonth rehabilitative programme for young adults on the special needs spectrum to be reintegrated into society. J has autism. As part of the programme, he goes to EQUAL every day to learn vital skills that will aid in his search for employment upon graduation.

The first time I met J, he asked me, "What's your name?" three times. This repetitive behavior, a common trait amongst youth with autism, was his little ritual repeated every time we met. After a few more interactions with J, I got to know him better. J was also particularly sensitive to sounds. I discovered this about him at the annual CAPT Guitarpella concert when J wanted to leave halfway due to the loud noises. This was where he also asked if he could take a polaroid of my friends and me. The question he then started asking me was, "Where is my photo?"

### He is always happy to wake up in the morning on EQUAL days.

On one trip down to EQUAL for my *Captstone* project, my project mentor and I bumped into his mother, Ms K\*. During our conversation with her, she revealed that her biggest worry as a parent has always been J's future. Will he find employment in the future? Who will take care of him in the future? All of her questions placed an emphasis on J's independence and ability to lead a life like every "normal" person after the passing of his parents. These concerns have led to J's participation in the EQUAL programme.



Photo Courtesy of WONG ENMIN

Prior to EQUAL, J was in a school for youth with special needs. Now, he is enrolled in the EQUATE programme at EQUAL. Every day, he takes the bus to and from EQUAL independently. At EQUAL, the students start the day by mucking out (i.e. cleaning the stables) together with their friends from the Scholars programme (for at-risk youth). Throughout the day, they receive training on horse management, such as grooming, riding and behaviour. With youth with autism, it is important for the instructors to employ a step-by-step approach when teaching. In addition, the lessons have to be repetitive in order for the students to remember what they have learned. As a lay person who has attempted to walk a horse once at EQUAL, I realize there is definitely more to trotting than just running beside the horse. Trotting requires the handler to stay calm and the horse to trust the handler. As such, I was elated to see a video of J trotting a horse independently a few months ago.

When we asked how Ms K knew that J enjoyed coming to EQUAL, she said "He is always happy to wake up in the morning on EQUAL days." Countless papers show the benefits of "change of scenery", inclusiveness and the sense of belonging to the community, the last of which is the most

important benefit of EQUAL consistently mentioned by the participants and their families. The staff members are very patient and take good care of J and his friends at EQUAL. The diverse student profile consisting of youth at-risk and youth with special needs also proves to be beneficial as they are able to learn from one another. The two groups of students participate in most activities together at EQUAL. This gives J a good opportunity to make friends and learn alongside them. In addition, Ms K shared that the Scholars have learned a lot through their interaction with youth with special needs. This creates a safe community for J to grow as a person and to receive support from the staff and friends at EQUAL. Since EQUAL is not a permanent place, the future for J remains unclear. However, I was heartened to learn that most students return to EQUAL to see their friends after graduation. This shows the strong sense of belonging the students have towards the people there - I believe that J feels that way as well.

Professor Temple Grandin, a world-renowned animal activist and autism spokesperson, once said that "You have got to keep autistic children engaged with the world. You cannot let them tune out." Through the wonderful work of EQUAL, J has been able to expand his social circle as well as his skill set. J's story has inspired me to look at an organisation and focus on the positive impact it has on the people. I sincerely wish that by sharing J's story, people will have a greater understanding of youth with special needs and their families. Do not be afraid to talk to them or befriend them! J has been a wonderful friend that I have met at EQUAL and he never fails to put a smile on my face. Now that we are friends, his question to me is "Can I go to your house?"

\*This name has been changed to protect the identity of the person.

#### Wong Enmin

Wong Enmin, a Life Science major, served as the co-founder of CAPT's People & Animal Community Engagement (PACE) from 2014 to 2016. She volunteered at EQUAL in 2014 and continued to do so in 2015 as a CAPTain. She is grateful that CAPT has provided her with a platform to explore her interests in animal-assisted therapies and animal welfare. Through PACE, she hopes to raise awareness on the benefits of animal-assisted activities for the community.

### FINDING IDENTITY



received a text message from a longtime friend, Farid, one day asking if I would like to join a conference on multiculturalism in Singapore. This would be my third year participating as a discussion facilitator in this conference. This year's topic was "Common Spaces".

"So, how do you like to be introduced?" Farid suggested highlighting diversity among the team of facilitators this year.

"I think I will be Malay this year, for my tanned skin." Students from my discussion group in the previous year had thought that I was Eurasian because they could not fit my facial features and petite build into the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others racial structure.

"Come on, you know what I meant. If PRC is an 'ouch' word to use, what is a more appropriate term? Chinese national?"

"Or you can just say that I am homeless," I joked. Farid sent me a hugging emoji.

I am a PRC Chinese. I am a Singaporean.

I am a not-so-new immigrant.

I am a third culture kid.

My family and I migrated to Singapore from China when I was eight years old. Being raised in two different places, I have had difficulty in identifying myself with either of the two nations. I am classified as a Chinese by citizenship as I still hold a passport issued by the government of the People's Republic of China. Yet, I hardly hold any sense of belonging to China and the Chinese mainland community. I cannot bring myself to say that I am 100% Singaporean either, despite my fluent Singlish, local taste buds, and all these years of education in the local Singaporean school system.

#### l felt different, like a tangerine in a basket of oranges.

I came to CAPT trying to find a balance between these two identities. Yet, I found myself stuck in a dilemma to act either as a PRC Chinese or a Singaporean. For a while, I thought that the issue could be resolved through code-switching – behaving in an appropriate manner based on the expectation of the people I was interacting with. At one point, my social life was split into two drastic parts. I could be eating a steamboat dinner with my PRC Chinese friends in Chinatown and then rushing back to CAPT to have Maggie Pattaya for supper with my Singaporean friends. Both sides ran parallel to each other and they never intersected.

Soon, I realized that the balance was all an illusion. With the core of my life in CAPT, most of my free time was spent participating in orientation camps, clubs and societies. I hung out with my local friends on a day-to-day basis. I grew closer to them, and I strayed away from the PRC Chinese community in Singapore. I could hardly find time for them, even for the group I used to be closest to. Yet, this compromise I made did not help to address my identity crisis.

"You are Singaporean to me. I have never ever thought of you as a Chinese," my Singaporean friends in CAPT told me.

But there were times when my local friends failed to understand some of the jokes I made because they were too Chinese for their understanding, my obsessive concern with academics because of the sense of guilt and responsibility I held towards my parents, or my frustration when I could not go for an impromptu Malaysia trip with them because I needed time to obtain a visa. I felt different, like a tangerine in a basket of oranges. There's barely any visible differences on our looks and yet, we are completely different on the inside.

I felt awkward when my Singaporean friends used the term 'Cheena'. I was conflicted when some commented that Chinese students lived like "phantoms" and did not participate in college activities. I was lost for words when some complained about the rowdy behavior of Chinese nationals. These interactions led me to wonder: How should I respond? Should I defend my fellow Chinese students? But who am I to do that? I no longer have a place in the PRC Chinese community. I am not seen as a PRC Chinese by others. In fact, I would not even consider myself as a PRC Chinese.

Alienation from the PRC Chinese group and failure to integrate fully as a Singaporean slowly translated into an enormous sense of guilt towards both communities. I retreated from most of the activities I used to be involved in and spent most of my time in my room, only with my closest friends around me. I became a "phantom".

The sharp transition from an eager participant to a "phantom" surprisingly brought me closer to some of the PRC Chinese residents in CAPT. I learnt that one of the Chinese girls on my floor was not joining student activities because she was taking as many as eight modules per semester to graduate early from school and reduce the financial burden of her parents. A Chinese

exchange student next door was not there for communal dinner in the dining hall because she found it difficult to understand the local Singaporean accent, and conveying her thoughts fluently in English was a challenge. I asked a Chinese friend why he did not represent his neighborhood in the inter-neighbourhood games even though he was a great chess player and enthusiast. He told me that he was not aware of the activity since he was not on Facebook. Soon, I learnt that being a phantom was not a choice they had made. It was the outcome of many other factors.

CAPT as a common space has provided many memorable experiences for me, and I will always cherish those memories that I have shared with my Singaporean and Chinese friends. However, the question of my identity remains, and I know I will have to continue to seek the answer as I navigate the challenges of straddling both the Singaporean and Chinese cultures.



#### Guo MeiQi

Guo MeiQi will be graduating from NUS in 2017 with a degree in Sociology. She served as the Director of CAPT's pioneering overseas community involvement project to Kerala, India. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering as a multi-cultural facilitator with various organisations, including OnePeople Singapore, to enable authentic dialogues among different communities. Her time in CAPT has taught her the value of audacity, tenacity and empathy.



### CHILDREN OF RENTAL **FLATS**

want to save up at least fifty dollars," Hazig\* declared boldly, confidence exuding from his thin frame.

"What are you going to use the money for? Buy yourself a new toy?" asked Aileen, one of our volunteers.

"No la, I want to give it all to my mother. Why would I keep it for myself?" he asked, genuine curiosity reflected on his face.

"How is your mum doing?"

"She's still sick sometimes. But she still has to work, so I'll take care of the rest," he replied bowing his head, clearly feeling uncomfortable speaking about his predicament at home.

Hazig, an inquisitive boy from a single mother household, is the oldest of three siblings. The friendly nine-year-old had this conversation with one of our volunteers. We were also aware that his mother was suffering from health issues, and that he often had to take care of himself and his siblings. Not many nine-year-olds in Singapore have to worry about taking care of their sick mothers and younger siblings at such a young age. Even fewer possess the selfless and generous spirit of Haziq. As I listened to numerous stories like his over the year and a half I spent interacting with children from the Jalan Kukoh estate. I was reminded of the incredible resilience and strength of character displayed by the children we saw during our time there. Their incredible spirit, coupled with a strong sense of community, is what helped the children cope with the difficult plight of being a part of a displaced family in Singapore.



### Last night we heard shouting next door," Michelle whispered.

I met Hazig and other children like him through Project Empowered, a mentoring programme I had started with a few friends from CAPT. The aim of the project was to engage with children growing up in the temporary shelters of the Jalan Kukoh estate. As we got to know the children better through the time we spent together in the programme, we were amazed by the resilience they showed and the stories they shared with us. Many of the children told us about how they cared for each other, needing to settle their meals by themselves while their parents were out working both day and night shifts. We even heard disturbing stories about guarrels and fights between different families forced to live together under one roof that the kids had overheard or witnessed.

"Last night we heard shouting next door," Michelle\* whispered.

"Shouting? You saw people fighting, is it?" I asked, worried that the children might have witnessed some form of domestic abuse.

"No, never see. But our mum told us the wife threatened to kill the husband with a knife. Then got a lot of shouting but we never see anything," Daniel\* said, a look of indifference on his face, as if used to hearing these types of stories.

"So you guys are ok, right? No one came in to threaten you all?"

"No, don't have. We just heard from our mum that the wife wanted to kill the husband."

This interaction I had with three siblings from our programme one Saturday morning illuminates the difficult circumstances the children are forced to live under. Not many children their age are removed from their homes and forced to share a small 3-room flat with another family facing similarly difficult circumstances. For families like Daniel's, the cramped living space, coupled with growing stress from a desperate situation, is bound to create tension among residents living in the flats managed by New Hope Community Services. These families have turned to New Hope as a last resort after losing their homes due to various circumstances ranging from financial troubles to family break-ups caused by a death or illness.

"There is always this group of boys who hang out at the playground. They sometimes like to disturb us and steal our ball. But I always can outrun them because I play rugby. So I'll run away sometimes with Daniel."

Faizal\*, another active nine-year-old mentee of ours told us of how they were often harassed by an older group of teenagers living in the Jalan Kukoh estate as well. As we spent time with the children, they formed their own community over time and often sought each other out even on weekdays after school. Not wanting to spend their time in their cramped living spaces, they would go to the nearby playground where, unfortunately, they would sometimes have these unpleasant encounters with the older boys.

Despite the numerous problems faced at home and in their neighborhood, the children still shared their victories.

"I got this award from my school - a \$1000 dollar bursary - because I scored the best in my cohort," Imran\* said sheepishly.

"Wow, that's so fantastic, Imran! I'm really proud of you!" I remember saying, with a huge smile on my face, feeling like a proud older brother.

"Yeah, but don't tell anyone. I'm shy," he laughed, timidly.

"Ok, so what are you doing with the money?"  $\;$ 

"Give my parents lor. Buy something for my brothers and sisters. Maybe get a new Kendama."

Imran was the eldest of a family of four siblings that joined our programme early on. His sister was recently accepted into Singapore Sports School and playing for the floorball national team. His bursary was an award he had received in his course in culinary school and we were all very proud and amazed at his achievement.

The children from Jalan Kukoh are forced to grow up in the difficult circumstance of not having a proper home. With their parents trying to get their lives back on track, these children are often not given the adequate attention they need to develop holistically. Despite the odds being stacked against them, we heard amazing stories of the children being prefects and leaders in their schools. Some, like Imran, had won awards and achieved good results. More important than their academic and scholastic achievements, however, was the fact that I saw their characters develop and grow over the months we were with them. I saw children display maturity and selflessness in taking care of their siblings, and I will never forget how these children showed immense loyalty and support for one another. It always amazed me how the children, who had so little, were willing to give so much. My experience there has allowed me to better understand the notion of giving selflessly and I have learnt that giving is not, nor should it be, a function of how much you have. The growth of the children has also made me realize just how impactful time spent together with a community in a loving manner can effect real and tangible change.

\*This name has been changed to protect the identity of the person.



#### Darrell Ong

Darrell Ong, a Psychology major, served as Co-Director of *Project Empowered* (the mentoring programme with rental flat children from Jalan Kukoh) from 2014 to 2015. Serving as Co-Chair/Academic Director for CAPT Student Symposium 2016 (CAPTISS - the college's regional conference on community engagement) and being involved in numerous community engagement activities in CAPT have exposed him to many pertinent social issues and given him the opportunity to enact meaningful initiatives to help address them.

### THE WARMTH OF A COMMUNITY



Photo Credit: FIONA TEO

he room was too small for us, with thirty-odd people trying to squeeze into a haphazard quasi-circle of chairs. As part of the *A Brief History of Inequality* module at CAPT, my 14 classmates and I were on a field trip to Beyond Social Services, a social service organisation that helps children and youth from less privileged backgrounds to break away from the cycle of poverty though community integration.

The introductory talk by the Executive Director, Mr Gerard Ee, had only just ended, and we were now welcoming the four families in the rental flat community who had agreed to a short visit to their flats. Truth be told, my expectations for the session ahead were not positive; I surmised that our host families would be sombre and moody, tired from working hard to make ends meet. I steeled myself to stay positive amidst the unhappy stories that they would surely tell, and made a mental note to watch my words, lest I said something tactless in conversation.

One of the boys caught my eye, and immediately threw up his arm for a hi-five. Awkwardly, I requited his friendliness

I watched as the Executive Director warmly clasped the hands of the residents who were gradually trickling into the space. The adults struck me as slightly nervous (I wondered briefly if my own face mirrored their apprehension), merely gracing us with soft smiles — save for one lady by the name of Fashila, who flashed us all a toothy grin as she made an exuberant entrance. All things considered, it might have been a relatively serious affair, if not for the six young children weaving around our chairs, and shouting at each other from across the room. One of the boys caught my eye, and immediately threw up his arm for a hi-five. Awkwardly, I requited his friendliness.

The initial uncertainty seemed to melt away after the Executive Director invited each family to introduce themselves and their rental flat neighbourhood of Jalan Bukit Merah. One by one, the adults in the room spoke up — at first, hesitantly, but later with quiet conviction. I couldn't help but notice that their introductions followed the same trend. They began to open up only when talking about their community. Their passion for the neighbourhood was palpable, tangible; it glistened in the air like a canopy that drew everyone in and held us tight. I remember the open smile on Rizal's face as he extolled the virtues of a community "so close, like a family," and the shiver and crack

in Sulaiman's voice as he shared about the under-15 neighbourhood football team that he coached. Most of all, I remember Mimin's tears, almost as effusive as her profuse thank-yous to her neighbours for not letting her be alone and then, moments later, Fashila's kind arm stretching out to encircle Mimin's shaking shoulders. My prior expectations now seemed laughably facile in the face of the indomitable spirit that was so evident in the stories that the residents told.

Shortly after this stirring exchange, our class split up into four parties and dutifully prepared to follow our hosts to their homes. Our host, Fashila, talked up a storm all the way from the Centre to her flat. As she spoke to us, she navigated her pram with easy precision, stopping every few sentences to check on her two-year-old daughter, who was babbling inside. I noted that as much as her daughter was guiet throughout our trip, her four-year-old son was energetic. A little rain had fallen, and every now and then, he stumbled a bit on the slippery pavements. He would make a great show out of it, too - a yelp of terror, quivering legs, chubby arms hovering dangerously close to the ground. But he never actually fell, always maneuvering his torso back to standing position with a broad smile on his face. Despite this apparent skill, my friends hissed anxiously every time he looked close to falling. I couldn't help but hold my breath for a guarter of a second. The trepidation of our party was clear on our faces. Fashila burst out laughing, and said, "He bluffing only lah, he like to show off for girls." Turning to her son, she chided, "See lah! Make people worry about you!" At this one inside joke, the vague worry that I would have to tread carefully around our host, simply because she was someone I had only just met, melted away. Fashila had so easily embraced us as her friends, so why didn't I do the same?

Our host's frank manner-of-factness was the canvas, her ebullient personality the paint; together, they painted us a vibrant picture of the neighbourhood. Fashila seemed to live and breathe genuine affection for everyone, tossing out nuggets of wisdom throughout our conversation, "If I see someone I don't know, I just talk to them lah! If they are new, then I want to bring them into the community." As she spoke, I thought, the concept of reaching out to others as freely as she did was simultaneously

so foreign and precious to me. For all my beliefs in the importance of a communal spirit, I had always found it difficult to step out of my shell to forge bonds with people whom I couldn't help but see as strangers. In stark contrast, Fashila's attitude of treating everybody as a friend she hadn't yet befriended enabled her to truly connect with others. With this realisation at the forefront of my mind, it then came as no surprise to me that every person who noticed Fashila greeted her loudly. I recall that we stopped for a short while at the periphery of the neighbourhood playground as a spirited conversation in Bahasa ensued between her and a lady from the next block. I comprehended little of the language, but the fact that the pair of neighbours shared a strong camaraderie was all too easily understood.

#### Everyone knows that if they need help, they can call me. If I need help, I'll call other people too!

At the end of our short house visit at Fashila's, I emerged deeply inspired by the spirit of her community. Fashila recounted countless stories of neighbours lending each other a helping hand: free tuition for each other's children, daily visits to the elderly among them, and help with even the most mundane, routine tasks like gardening or laundry. "Everyone knows that if they need help, they can call me. If I need help, I'll call other people too!" was a line repeated more than once by our ever-smiling host.

Rental flats, one- or two-room by default, are not big. After the field trip, I realised that the size of the flat may be small but the occupiers of these small flats have the biggest hearts and widest smiles that I've ever seen.

#### Fiona Teo

Fiona Teo, a Linguistics major, has done what she can to best serve CAPT as Vice Director of the CAPT Publicity Committee in 2016, and member of the inaugural team of The CAPTsule (the annual yearbook/ magazine hybrid) as a writer in 2015. Being heavily involved in content creation for the College magazine has trained her eye for detail, which she gladly uses to appreciate the world around her.

### FINDING A SCHOOL THAT FITS



Photo Courtesy of SPECTRA SECONDARY SCHOOL

was at Spectra Secondary School as part of the *Independent Study Module* I was reading at CAPT in 2015. During a Parent Support Group meeting, I was introduced to a couple who earnestly shared the school experiences of their daughter, Valerie, before and after her time at Spectra Secondary School. A year later, Valerie and her parents wholeheartedly welcomed me to their home to share in greater detail how Spectra Secondary School had tremendously changed Valerie's life. From these conversations, Valerie's fascinating story of overcoming adversity slowly unfolded before me.

Valerie was very much like her peers when she was in primary school - a generally well behaved, earnestly curious, easy-going, bubbly and friendly student who also always looked forward to recess time to play with her friends. However, she was slower at picking up academic knowledge and had some speech issues.

While in Primary 4, Valerie faced difficulties in her studies and failed her examinations because of the pressure from a stern teacher, whose expectations she felt she could not meet due to her slower learning and comprehension abilities. Additionally, she was depressed from the untimely loss of her grandfather.

She became afraid of her teachers and principal, and extremely reluctant to go for school and classes. Valerie's parents explained that she would scurry away and hide behind them every time she saw her principal and teachers, while shaking in fear. She would bawl outside her classroom in utter unwillingness to enter it. Valerie's low self-confidence caused her speech issues to worsen.

The situation deteriorated and Valerie was referred to the school counselors and a psychologist from the Ministry of Education (MOE). Due to the severity of her condition, her parents feared that she would suffer a nervous breakdown and considered allowing her to quit school. A turning point came when Valerie's parents were advised by the psychologist from MOE

to seek further help from a psychiatrist and speech therapist at the National University Hospital (NUH).

By Primary 6, Valerie showed signs of improvement in her self-esteem and speech issues as a result of her consistent psychiatric care and speech therapy, but she still had problems passing her Foundation subjects. Valerie's parents were apprehensive about sending Valerie to mainstream schools for Normal (Technical) education due to the heavy focus on academics and unhealthy comparisons among students, which were common in schools with multiple tracks. They were concerned these academic expectations and comparisons may further dampen Valerie's already battered self-esteem.

Fortunately, the NUH psychiatrist suggested Valerie try out Spectra Secondary School, which had all the right ingredients for Valerie to overcome her personal adversity from the get-go: the equivalent of a mainstream school where a pass in one's PSLE was required; a homogeneous community of only Normal (Technical) students; a curriculum that blended vocational skills with academic education, and an accessible location for Valerie's daily commute to the school. As such, Valerie strived towards attaining the minimum grades necessary to vie for a place at Spectra Secondary School. Eventually, with sheer perseverance and hard work, Valerie not only scored a pass in her PSLE but also scored high enough to enroll into both most mainstream schools with Normal (Technical) education and Spectra Secondary School. In the end, it was ultimately decided that Spectra Secondary School it would be for Valerie!



I cannot believe we found this made-to-measure school for Valerie, one that doesn't give up on students who are not good at their academics. Fast-forward from Valerie's experiences prior to Spectra Secondary School to the present, and there I was in Valerie's class. I doubt I will ever forget that moment; seeing Valerie for the first time, I could not detect the faintest hint of speech and confidence issues! She was your average, inquisitive and energetic student raising her hand eagerly to answer her teacher's questions and chatting cheekily with her partner in class. I observed her confidently demonstrating to her partner how to solve some math questions her partner was having trouble solving. In my interaction with her, I did not observe any speech or confidence problems.

In fact, her teacher did not remember Valerie ever having a history of speech and confidence issues, until a look at Valerie's portfolio reminded her - a sure sign that Valerie has not shown any of these problems in her daily school life. I finally understood the happiness Valerie's parents had revealed to me during the informal coffee chat that Spectra's environment has indeed been life-changing for Valerie.

Valerie's mum shared with me, "I cannot believe we found this made-to-measure school for Valerie, one that doesn't give up on students who are not good at their academics, but instead, strives to give them a chance to prove to themselves that they can be someone someday." Her words kept ringing in my head as I saw Valerie's radiant smile and fresh candour illuminating her surroundings.

So what is it about Spectra Secondary School that has led to Valerie's positive leap in life? Valerie and her parents unanimously emphasized that it is really Spectra's teachers. These teachers have unstintingly showered Valerie and her peers with unadulterated patience, love and sincerity, ensuring that no one is left behind no matter how fast or slow they go in their studies.

Spectra's teachers' indomitable spirit to help their students see how the technical skills they are learning can contribute to society, so long as they uphold good character values, permeates the school culture. I had the opportunity to experience this spirit personally. I was facing several difficulties catching the ball during a Physical Education session with Spectra students, but instead of berating or laughing at a total stranger like me, all of them screamed, "It's ok! You can do it! Don't give up!" In just 5 minutes, I was a beneficiary of Spectra's inclusive and inspiring school culture.



Photo Credit: CHAN JUN HAO

In Valerie's own words about what makes her happy at Spectra Secondary School, "The activities; they've got many activities for us and they are very fun. The teachers are also very nice and very caring."

The larger principle from Valerie's story for me is precisely embodied by what Valerie's mum had said to me, "Spectra students can be people with bright futures, only that they require a longer route to success, and Spectra Secondary School is the place that will prove that." Indeed, it matters not how fast or slow you go, so long as you do not stop.

I believe that a story of how one overcomes adversity to eventually succeed is valuable, if not more valuable, than a story of a smooth-sailing, successful journey. My parting words to Valerie in our last interview were, "Strive on and be successful in your own way. Then share your story of how you overcame adversity with people out there. Go out there and inspire, okay?"

Valerie nodded her head enthusiastically, beaming widely, and for a moment, I thought I saw a twinkle of a bright and captivating future sparkle in her eyes.



#### Chan Jun Hao

Chan Jun Hao graduated with a degree in Political Science in 2016. At CAPT, Jun Hao read the *Independent Study Module*, which focused on understanding the challenges students from the Normal (Technical) Education system face through the community of Spectra Secondary School. CAPT provided the opportunity for Jun Hao to pursue his interest in studying and documenting the challenges students from the various communities of Singapore's education face that hinder their learning endeavors, as well as solutions some of them have derived to overcome these personal adversities.

## STRUGGLES FACED BY AN O-LEVEL RE-TAKER



Photo Courtesy of CHARLES WEE

ast time, all along, I thought I was quite a smart person," says Charles Wee. "So I didn't study much but still could get decent grades in secondary school. So when I was young, I just thought – 'Since I'm smart, I can relax and life will be good,' until I failed my O-Levels."

Sometimes Stuff Happens, an initiative by a group of students from CAPT, aimed to encourage and assist students who retake their O-Levels. The project team found out that one of our peers, Charles Wee, a Business undergraduate and a CAPT alumnus, had retaken his O-Levels. We sat down with Charles to learn first-hand what he went through during the retaking process, and how we could assist students who need support in retaking their O-Levels. Charles answered immediately, "Instead of feeding them fish, you need to teach them how to fish."

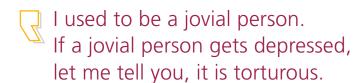
As Charles did not pass his O-Level English Language exam, making it very difficult for him to enter a local junior college, or even a popular course in a local polytechnic, he decided to make an appeal to Yishun Junior College (YJC).

#### The Road of Appealing

"I used my prelim score and went to YJC via the Provisional Admission Exercise (PAE) system before the official release of the O-Level results. I quite like the JC culture," he recalls. "When I found out I had failed my O-Levels, many people said to me, 'Hey, why not just go to a poly and do well? You can go to a university!"

"There was some truth in it," Charles continues, "but the reality is that with failing O-Level scores, there were not many courses for me to apply for. When I looked at the application form, the number of choices I could apply for... I could count with my hand, y'know!"

Charles was very determined to enter a junior college; hence, he went to YJC to appeal once he obtained his O-Level results.



"After I got my results, even I'm quite a strong guy, but I teared," says Charles, "I walked all the way from my Secondary School to YJC to appeal. I thought – 'Hey I was already enrolled in YJC during PAE, I would have a chance.' But one of the Heads of Department told me straight to my face, 'Your points don't make the cut. There's nothing we can do. This is the system. Try Millennia Institute.' "

Charles was discouraged, but he still held hope as the entry criteria for Millennia Institute would be more lenient compared to the junior colleges.

"The next day I brought my mum down to Millennia Institute to appeal. That was a...hard experience, to be honest. When I was at the General Office, I told the reception lady, 'I would like to speak to the principal for appeal'. The lady said, 'Let me see your results...you have failed your English Language and we are not able to take you.' "

#### **Re-taking O-Levels**

The unsuccessful appeals were a big setback for Charles, but he did not give up. After much consideration, Charles decided to retake his O-Levels.

"I hate to use this word, but I was really quite depressed for three to four months. Like, woah! Life was really bad. I used to be a jovial person. If a jovial person gets depressed, let me tell you, it is torturous."

He had no one to talk to, or worse, people around him simply told him "I understand, I understand. Everything will be fine."

"But no, they wouldn't understand," Charles says, "They haven't been in that situation. So, it was really difficult to understand me. It was very lonely, and extremely challenging. Because you didn't know what's out there, including what's the update on the syllabus and stuff."

#### **New Beginning**

The last time I met Charles, he was inaugurated as the Business School Class Ambassador of Batch 2015.

I remember him saying, "I think retaking my O-Levels was the best decision I made in my life. Really, really! Because once you have been in the doldrums, you realise that your resistance and tolerance for failure is so much higher. Then it prepared me very well for the coming years ahead after I failed my O-Levels."

He had done well enough to be accepted to YJC. Being able to wear the JC uniform was a big sense of achievement to Charles. He cherished every single moment in YJC.

"That's why I worked very, very, very hard in JC. I got almost straight A's. I got into a good university, and now I'm...doing really quite well, because of my failure," Charles ended with a smile.

Hearing Charles's experience gave the team of *Sometimes Stuff Happens* an insight into the struggles of the O-Level re-taker community. In May 2016, we managed to meet up with the students who were retaking their exams in 2016. The team aided the re-takers in meeting fellow re-takers, arranging studying sessions and sharing revision resources. We hope we can continue to support this community and empower them to achieve their dreams.



#### Liu Guanyu

Liu Guanyu, an Applied Mathematics major, read the *Capstone Experience* module entitled *Sometimes Stuff Happens* with four teammates. The project studied the challenges faced by O-Level re-takers and focused on creating a support system for them. Guanyu is in his fourth year at CAPT, and he cherishes the friendships forged and values instilled at the College.

### EVERYONE CAN PLAY PING PONG



t is easier to change oneself than society." This quote from Dr Darren Chua, Chief Learning Officer of Potter's Clay Education, struck me deep in my heart as he explained that as a person with a disability, he often has to change himself to fit into society's expectations, rather than being accepted for who he is.

Dr Darren Chua is a para-athlete with the Singaporean Paralympic team. He won a bronze medal in the 7th ASEAN Games and a gold medal in the 8th ASEAN Games in table tennis. He is an inspiring individual whom I have had the privilege to meet and learn from as a student in CAPT's *Hidden Communities* module, where as a guest speaker he shared his experiences as a person with a physical disability. Even though his hopes and dreams of practicing medicine were shattered in the face of suffering a stroke that left him paralyzed on the right side just after completing his medical degree at the National University of Singapore, he persevered and refused to give up on life. In fact, he became stronger as an individual and was more determined to surpass his limitations and show the world that he was more than just a person with a physical disability.

I sat down with Dr Chua to discuss his experience of living with a physical disability and his goals in raising awareness of the abilities and strengths that persons with disabilities can bring to the greater Singapore community. When asked what were some of the challenges he faced at the time of his stroke, he said that initially, it was "the physicality of the stroke". Thereafter, it was the "mindset that people had towards people with disabilities". He went on to explain that this was evident through their stares and the discrimination he experienced as he was working – compared to a person

without a physical disability, his work was rated as being of lower quality and his mistakes were seen as more severe. However, he noted that it was not their fault for perceiving people with disabilities in that way. Singapore, being a very young society, still needs more understanding and education about people with disabilities.

Curious, I asked how he managed to overcome all these challenges. He responded by saying that it was his mindset. At that point in time, he asked himself, "What is it I can still do?" Wow, I thought. I found it very inspiring and encouraging to come across an individual who is able to stay so strong and optimistic despite going through the life-changing obstacles that resulted from his stroke. Instead of focusing on what he couldn't do, he was determined to focus on his strengths and capabilities.

Next, I enquired, "What is one common stereotype about a person with a physical disability?" Dr Chua responded that a common stereotype is that "people with a disability are not able". He further elaborated on how society tends to focus on what people with physical disabilities cannot do, instead of what they can do. This boils down to people's mindsets. He said that the extent to which people with disabilities are able to achieve something really depends not only on how much chance we, as a society, give, but how open minded we are about accepting them and letting them be effective contributors in the community.

Furthermore, Dr Chua explained that there are two ways to respond to the limiting mindset of society towards people with physical disabilities, either "Let Singapore grow old together", which will naturally expose society to people with disabilities, albeit a much slower process, or "Come up and do more for those with physical disabilities, and share their stories", the latter being his main goal. Dr Chua aims to accelerate the process and be a catalyst in changing society's mindset towards people with physical disabilities and help them become effective contributors in the country.



Photo Credit: MICHELLE CHUA

Our failure or disease does not define who we are. We are defined by what we are able to contribute to society.

One example of Dr Chua's efforts to raise awareness of the community with disabilities is through bringing together table tennis players from disabled and non-disabled teams around Singapore. On 7th August 2016, I joined such an event organized by Dr Chua entitled "Everyone Play Ping Pong!"

(EPP). His aim was to create an event where groups of various abilities can come together to play sports. I enjoyed interacting with the Paralympic athletes as I played table tennis with them. I was surprised that some of the athletes even qualified as para-athletes as they seemed to have no apparent physical disability. As this was my first time playing a sport with Paralympic athletes, I was amazed at their swift movements and accuracy. Furthermore, they were very warm and friendly towards me, patiently teaching me how to improve my table tennis and giving tips on how to beat my opponent. Personally, I felt that this event was a wonderful opportunity for athletes with and without a disability to interact and develop a greater understanding of each other.

While I do agree that "It is easier to change oneself than society", it is not impossible to change our society's mindset towards the community with physical disabilities. With people like Dr Chua, who have the heart and willingness to initiate events such as EPP to bridge this gap in society, I am positive that change will arise. Though the process may be slow, there is hope that in the future, societal perceptions will be shaped and changed. Hopefully, as a result of these interactions, people will learn to be more understanding towards people with physical disabilities and recognize their strengths. Hopefully, one day, those with physical disabilities will not feel that they will have to change themselves in order to fit into society, but instead, they will be accepted for who they are and the gifts that they can offer society.

Knowing not only the important message Dr Chua's story brings to Singapore society, but the encouragement that his message can be for the physically disabled community as well, I asked him, "What are some encouraging words that you would give to someone with a physical disability?" He answered by saying, "Disability is only in the mind. Our failure or disease does not define who we are. We are defined by what we are able to contribute to society."

Mindset. What I've learned from speaking to Dr Chua is that this is a powerful determinant to how one's life is shaped, whether you are a person with or without a disability. Many people with physical disabilities give up on themselves and society can also give up on them. What people with disabilities need to do, according to Dr Chua, is to "fight for their own destiny, their significance in life", and society also needs to "give them a chance to shine". He stressed that we, as people with physical disabilities, are capable of achieving and succeeding in society today. He sincerely hopes that one day, both society as well as people with physical disabilities can come together in a new equilibrium where we can all live together, where we can all grow and glow together.

How amazing it would be to see this happen in Singapore!



#### Michelle Chua

Michelle Chua, a Psychology major, served in the CAPT Sports Committee in her first year, as well as Programmes IC for the overseas community involvement project to Bangalore. Currently, she serves in her house committee. Michelle read the *Hidden Communities* module, which introduced her to Dr Darren Chua and the challenges facing persons with physical disabilities in Singapore. She treasures her time in CAPT as it provides her with an array of opportunities to get involved with the community, teaching her to be grateful for everything she has.

# THE COURAGE OF A VICTIM OF ABUSE



Photo Courtesy of SKYE SOON TZU HSIANG

#### ho is Danyya?

Everyone has a story to tell, but some people have stories that inspire you to be braver, kinder, and stronger. One such inspiring individual is Danyya Ateera, the author of *Even In Silence*.

Danyya is a survivor of sexual abuse and family violence. At the tender age of nine, she was abused by her stepfather. On other occasions, she was punished harshly by her mother, who beat her with objects around the house, like belts and hangers. It was not until the age of 14 that she finally lodged a police report against her abusers.

Ten years later, Danyya bravely wrote and shared her story in a bid to let other victims who were suffering in silence know that they were not alone. For Danyya, writing her story was a journey of self-healing:

Writing the book brought about a lot of emotions that I never got around to confronting. Yet the more I wrote, the more I understood and got encouraged at the resilience I never thought I had to rise up to the occasion.

#### Danyya and I

I was part of Danyya's publishing team, in charge of editing her manuscript. At the first meeting, I was warned that the content would be graphic and disturbing. On the computer screen, I was shown snippets of the manuscript that graphically described her experiences of rape. I nodded sombrely, not too sure what was ahead of me. Although I was excited to start a new project, I wasn't sure if I could take on the challenge of handling such a painful and challenging subject matter.

When I initially received the manuscript, the huge word count of 50,000 words did not faze me. Instead, it was the story that did so. As it became increasingly intense, dark, and heart-wrenching, I found it difficult to edit, or even continue to read on.



I couldn't help but feel very anxious, sad, and afraid for Danyya as she related her experiences of being abused. How could a Primary 3 student defend herself from a grown man with ill intent, and what could she do when trusted adults, such as teachers and the police, could not, and in some cases, would not, protect her? It was horrifying to read about her experiences, and I had to take a step back and let my anger and agitation settle.

With every sentence, I could feel her fear, her helplessness, her desperation, her humiliation, her pleas of help - all of these intense emotions seeped through the pages. They were so real, raw and honest. I edited those chapters with a heavy heart, in disbelief that this had happened in an ordinary looking household. It could have happened to anyone, and it was a chilling thought.



### ... survivors look just like us. Except that they have a vibe of tough resilience about them.

I got to meet Danyya in person sometime later. It was guite strange to put a face to the character I had been fleshing out in a Word document. I did not really know what to expect. I wondered whether Danyya would be a very reserved, serious person. What does a survivor look like?

Well, survivors look just like us. Except that they have a vibe of tough resilience about them. When I first met Danyya, she had a big, bubbly smile that would put anyone at ease. Tall and confident, she was very friendly and had a cheerful disposition. You could never tell that she was a victim of sexual abuse. Her optimism was infectious, and she laughed easily. We got along readily and discussed matters over dinner and hot chocolate.

Later, I found out that she was only a year older than me. This was a shocking and sobering realisation for me for I had grown up in a rather sheltered environment, and such 'scary', 'bad' things rarely happened to people around me. In fact, my friends and I hardly heard about such traumatic experiences, except in the news which often felt very detached from our own lives. It took a while for me to wrap my head around it.

To be frank, abuse is not something I think about every day. Meeting Danyya and getting to know her story definitely drove home the message that though we may not publicly see a lot of these transgressions in society, they nonetheless exist. I feel ashamed that I had not paid more attention to such issues earlier.

#### A voice for the voiceless

In 2015, *Even In Silence* was published. It was a proud moment when I attended Danyya's book launch.

Dressed elegantly, Danyya introduced her book to the audience. She reiterated her goal of sharing her story to help others in similar plights. She was the voice for the voiceless. In talking about her book, Danyya said, "I hope the book will give a glimpse to others out there how early intervention looks like, and how we can be better in prevention and restoration, so that anyone undergoing abuse can have a full life, like me."

While writing the story, Danyya also had to struggle with legalities as well as frayed relationships with her mother and stepfather. Though names in the book had been changed, Danyya's childhood photo was printed in the book. Additionally, the book was published under her real name in order to encourage others to step forward to share their stories as the action of sharing can have a very empowering effect.

Since then, Danyya has been featured in the newspapers, and the sale of the book has been brisk. Proceeds from the book are donated to selected charities that help survivors of family violence.

#### "A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle."

Even in the darkest times, Danyya actively chose not to give up. Instead, she converted her pain into positive energy, choosing to help others by bravely sharing her story.

To me, her courage and willingness to help others through the sharing of her own experience has been absolutely inspiring. Her message is a powerful and uplifting one. After crossing paths with Danyya, I have also tried to be more courageous in my own life. I try to face my struggles head on, and hesitate less to seek help from others. In our reserved Asian society, perhaps it may be difficult for us to ask for help, but now I have learnt that seeking help is not a shameful thing at all.

I have also seen the amazing effects of how sharing one's story can be so empowering. We might think that our experiences do not matter much to anyone else other than ourselves, but I found that when you are vocal about your stories, you give others permission to share their own as well. For that reason, I keep my blog alive, and hope that my experiences and thoughts can serve one purpose: to tell others that they are not alone.

Today, Danyya is pursuing further studies overseas. When in Singapore, she also volunteers at Beautiful People SG, mentoring at-risk girls. I am so proud of where she is today. She continues to inspire many, one heart at a time.



#### Skye Soon Tzu Hsiang

Skye Soon Tzu Hsiang graduated from NUS in 2014 with a degree in Sociology. She learnt of Danyya's book project from resident fellow, Dr Tan Lai Yong, whose *Community Leadership* module she read. She was roped in to editing Danyya's book. Her time at CAPT has been thoroughly inspiring because of the vibrant community, and for that she is eternally grateful.

## SET FREE TO SERVE



Photo Courtesy of JONATHAN KOH

ood morning!" A bright and familiar voice drifts down the corridor as Ms Adeline Wong, Family Care Lead at Prison Fellowship Singapore (PFS), greets the children from afar.

"How are you today?" she asks the little ones, who are still feeling a little groggy, with a wave and a wide grin on her face before turning to greet me.

Another week has passed and the children are gathered once again for their weekly tuition and enrichment programme at the Care Club, which serves the children of prison inmates and ex-offenders. Adeline has been running the support group for the last four years as part of the Family Care Ministry of PFS. As head of the ministry, she also organises home visitations to the families of inmates and does case management for such families. The ministry works alongside various organisations like the Singapore Prison Service, Family Service Centres and local churches, to serve the needs of these families.

Adeline is no stranger to their needs. Her own father was on death row while her mum was pregnant with her. Her parents had been trying to conceive for six years, but her father would never be able to witness his daughter's birth.

During her childhood, life seemed to be pretty bleak and lonely. She never knew the reason for her father's passing and was told by her mum to lie about it. That made her feel that there must have been something shameful surrounding his death. She was a quiet child, always choosing to keep to herself, so much so that her teachers thought that she might have autism.

In her teens, however, she turned rebellious, mixed with bad company, and was constantly getting into trouble. In her own words, she would probably have ended up in prison herself if she had continued down the path she was on.

Then came a point in Adeline's life when everything seemed meaningless and she started to contemplate suicide. It was at her lowest point that she made a friend who began to walk through that period of darkness with her and showed her a relationship in her new faith that would transform her life.

With a new found passion for her new faith, Adeline decided to enroll into a seminary, where she met a fellow student who was a staff member at PFS. By then, Adeline had already known through her own research of old newspaper archives about what had happened to her father. Knowing that PFS had a ministry that served children who shared a similar background as herself, she eagerly joined as a volunteer. There, she came to meet Mrs Khoo Keh Hong, the wife of the late Rev Henry Khoo. It was there that the different pieces of her life began to fall into place.

Rev Khoo started Prison Fellowship Singapore, which is the local chapter of Prison Fellowship International. While volunteering at PFS, Adeline read a book authored by him called *Shoes Too Big*. This book is a collection of stories and pictures of the work that his father, Rev Khoo Siaw Hua, had done as the first chaplain of Singapore Prisons.

Adeline brought the book home to her mother and showed it to her. While browsing through the old photos, her mother recognised Rev Khoo right away and said that he had ministered to Adeline's father before his death and supported their family during that difficult time. Through the book, Adeline came to learn more about the work he had done as prison chaplain and was deeply inspired by it.

Soon after this discovery, Adeline was offered a position as the Co-ordinator of Family Care (currently Family Care Lead) at PFS, which Mrs Khoo had recommended Adeline to apply for believing she would be a perfect fit. Since then, Adeline has been a gift to the children and family of offenders and ex-offenders. At times, her work even extends outside of normal working hours, such as accompanying the elderly parent of an inmate to the hospital in the middle of the night during an emergency because there is no one else around to help.

Through it all, the greatest lesson she has learnt is to accept the past, to forgive and to persevere. Adeline recited her favorite quote by Lewis Benedictus Smedes that gives her meaning and the courage to forgive, "Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free and to realise the prisoner was you."

### Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free and to realise the prisoner was you.

I started volunteering at Care Club through my *Independent Study Module* at CAPT. I am now mentoring two boys there as a result of experiencing Adeline's palpable joy, love and patience for the children. She has inspired me in many ways along the way, and she never fails to provide encouragement and timely advice. Care Club has become a special place not only for the children and youth, but also for the volunteers, like myself, who serve there.



#### Jonathan Koh

Jonathan Koh, a Pharmacy major, served as President of CAPT College Students' Committee from 2014 to 2015. Through a Junior Seminar, Jonathan came to know of Prison Fellowship Singapore where he has been volunteering on a weekly basis. In his third year, Jonathan read the *Independent Studies Module* on fatherhood programmes for fathers in prisons. Together with Lakeside Family Services, he piloted a new programme for incarcerated fathers. CAPT has given him countless opportunities for growth.

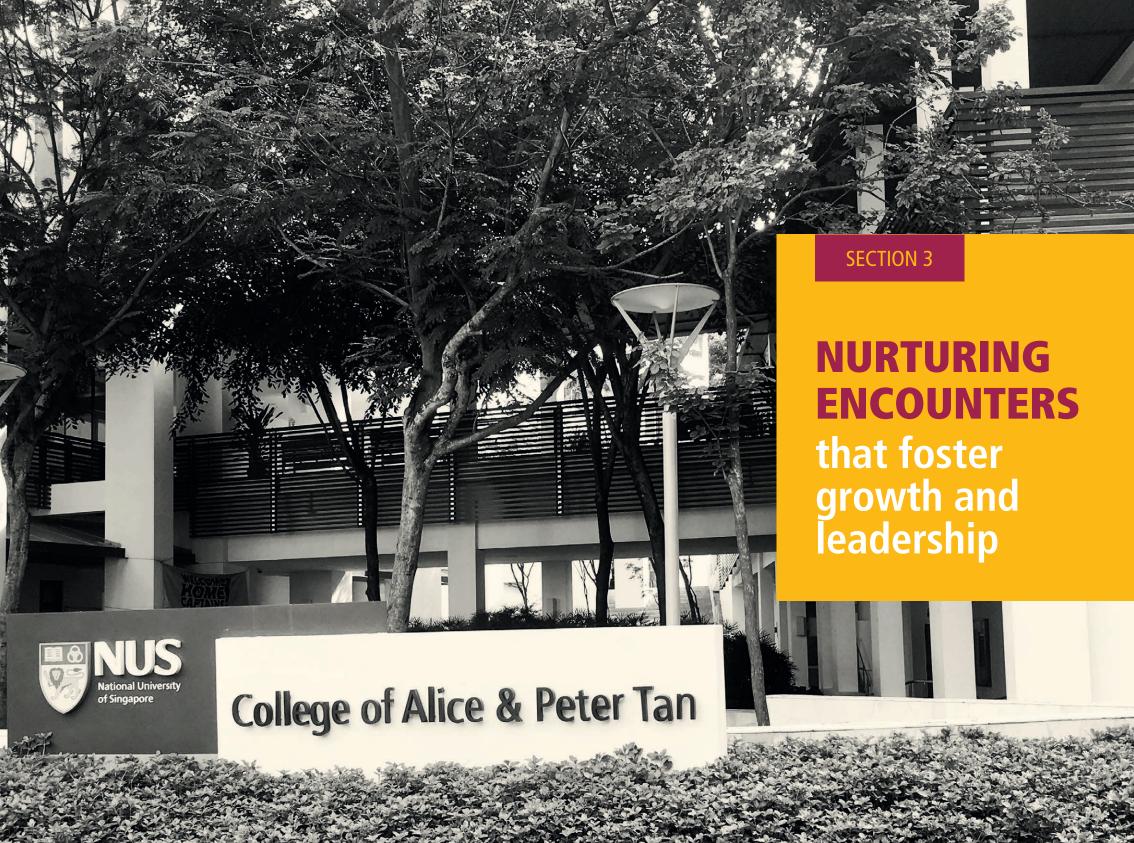




Photo Courtesy of WONG ZI HENG

## I FOUND **A HOME**

n 3rd August 2013, my life took an unexpected turn. It was the last day of the Orientation week for the Faculty Of Science and I was there as a senior at the camp. We were at Sentosa. Everyone was enjoying their time at the beach. Little did I know that it would be the last day that I would be standing and running around. A dive was all it took. The next moment, I was in the water, paralysed. I held on to my last breath motionless, unable to struggle. I had to wait for my friends to pull me out of the water.

One of the bones in my neck had fractured and it injured my spinal cord, causing paralysis from my chest down and in many parts of my arms. After undergoing a surgical operation to remove the fragments and grafting a bone to replace the fractured portion, I took a year of leave from school to undergo intensive rehabilitation. I had to relearn many things, such as eating, writing, using a phone, and pushing my wheelchair. With my fingers unable to move and having no control over my torso, a simple task such as flipping the pages of a book became difficult and time consuming to complete.

As I started to think of my return to NUS to complete my studies, I visualised minimal time spent in school due to the challenges of traveling from the east to the west every day. It was during that time when a senior manager from the Dean's office of the Faculty of Science told me about CAPT's interest in having me stay at their residential college on campus. I was uncertain of the feasibility at first due to my disability. However, after a trial stay, residing on campus seemed possible despite my physical dependencies.

Before my injury, I had little exposure to and knowledge of disabilities. It was only after my injury that I learnt for myself the challenges faced by this community, such as the challenge that a person in a wheelchair has when opening a door and going through it. Due to the inability to move my fingers because of my injury, I now need the help of someone around me to pick things up that I may have dropped on the ground. Through these experiences, I have come to recognize the importance of a culture of inclusivity as an answer to many of these difficulties in day-to-day activities. Being able to stay on campus was much of a surprise to many of my peers with spinal cord injuries as we are dependent on others in many aspects of our daily life.

B

Every morning, they help me with my activities of daily living, such as preparing my medication, helping me to get out of bed, and squeezing my toothpaste.

However, through the daily help of my CAPT neighbours, fellow students, my stay at CAPT has become possible. Every morning, they help me with my activities of daily living, such as preparing my medication, helping me to get out of bed, and squeezing my toothpaste. We spend a lot of time together, having meals, and chatting about everything, from the events that happened in the day to our views on recent issues. I am grateful for the strong bonds that have been forged and the laughter and memories that we share.

Living in CAPT has also allowed me to participate in and lead many university activities as I spend most of my time in school, enabling me to gain a richer university experience beyond my studies that commuting from home would

not have allowed. Through events such as the Community Engagement Festival, I have had the opportunity to interact and spend time with foreign workers, providing me the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the lives and needs of hidden communities in Singapore. Outside of CAPT, I had the opportunity to be part of the 35th Science Club Management Committee as the Bash Director, and as a result, I organized the annual Science Bash.

More than just receiving assistance and support from those around me, I have contributed to the community through sharing my first-hand experience on the challenges that come with physical disabilities. For example, I have shared many of my newly learnt insights with project groups working on research ranging from mobile applications to business innovations and even documentary videos with the goal of creating a universal design in these areas that caters to persons with physical disabilities. In addition, I was invited to share my story with fellow CAPTains at a Master's Tea as a way of educating my peers. Beyond people with disability, I hope that through sharing my experiences and challenges, I can encourage members of the general community who may be 'down' with their own set of challenges.

My experience at CAPT is a demonstration of the possibility of creating an inclusive environment in a university setting. More than just a hostel, CAPT has transformed my university life into a fulfilling one with the warmth and assistance of the residents, and has changed my life and those around me through the time spent with my CAPT neighbours and the leadership opportunities I have had as a result.

#### Wong Zi Heng

Wong Zi Heng, a Physics major with a minor in Nanoscience, took a year of leave from studies to undergo rehabilitation after an unfortunate accident in 2013 which resulted in his paralysis from the chest down and also part of his arms. He later returned to school in 2014. He is grateful to be able to live in CAPT with the kind help of friends as he learns to cope with his new found challenges.

## AFTER YOU START A CONVERSATION

After You was meant to ease the audience into talking about mental illness as a part of everyday reality.

ow do you talk about something that some people don't believe exists?

Imaginatively, I'd like to think.

In my second year in CAPT, I had the privilege of bringing CAPTheatre to life with a fantastic group of people. One year, two productions and three executive committees later, it's pretty much my favourite thing to come out of CAPT. Spontaneity has always been our main thing (read: minimum effort, maximum results; or, just whack la). When planning the next semester, the executive committee decided, literally between breaths and bites of cheese fries, to return to community engagement with a focus on mental illness.

We didn't have a particular reason for our choice of topic. There was no inspiring story or presently unfolding conflict that set us on the narrative. I personally think it's the intersection between what drama does and the nature of mental illness. Both look at the differences between perception and reality. When you're in the theatre, you're exposed to more than one version of reality at all times. You know that what's happening onstage is fictional, but you have to suspend your disbelief in order to get your money's worth. For the actors and the production crew, reality and fiction are even closer. Even as we throw ourselves into the illusion, the story-world, we see the directions in our head: [whisper], [forcefully], [exit].

The schizoaffective disorder of the play's main character, Terence Chia, puts him in a similar position. The scriptwriters titled the work *After You* in reference to the death of Terence's young son, Nicholas, the cause for Terence's psychosis. After losing Nicholas, Terence fell into a cycle of mania and depression, and developed hallucinations of his son's presence around the house. He straddles two versions of reality, both of them painful. The one with Nicholas allows him to cope with the loss – he is happiest puttering about the kitchen preparing food for him, chatting, and celebrating birthdays-that-never-were. But Terence has another child too, Natalie, who struggles to love and care for him. When Terence cuts a slice of Nicholas's birthday cake, Natalie is consumed with grief.

After You was executed through forum theatre. At certain points in the play, audience members could raise their hands to intervene in an objectionable scene and improve its outcome. It was a way of starting a conversation, by having members of the audience recognize problems and then offer solutions to fix the problem. After all, mental illness is still a relatively new concept. It was only recognized as a medical disorder in the 1970s, after the introduction of Prozac to treat depression, which makes it as new-fangled as email. Before that, mental illness was considered "imaginary", one that could be explained away through Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis. These attitudes still prevail in the "out of sight, out of mind" mentality that applies to more conservative segments of the population. A friend of mine who has depression told me her parents passed it off as "boy problems" for the longest time.

After You was meant to ease the audience into talking about mental illness as a part of everyday reality, which it is for people who have it. In order to depict the story from Terence's point of view, we had Nicholas as a physical presence on stage in the first part of the play. While working on an assignment in the living room, Terence chatted to his son about the most banal topics — his job as a freelance programmer, sleeping early, Natalie's new boyfriend, etc. Comfortably ensconced in an armchair, Nicholas listens as he fiddles with a blue iPhone. In the next scene, Terence is outraged by Natalie's anguished reminder that "Nicholas is dead! He's been dead for 15 years!" He turns away from her in silence. She might as well have insisted on the walls being purple, or something ridiculous like that. Nicholas takes a step forward. "I'm right here," he says.



Photo Courtesy of ALISON KOH

This first segment concludes with Natalie herself withdrawing – she curls up into a ball on a darkened stage, displaying the first signs of depression. Following this, the performance moved into its second phase, where audience members could intervene to change the outcome for the better. Mun Yee and I were facilitators, working through the specifics of each suggestion and their rationale. They were wonderfully responsive. When Terence flings his pills on the floor at the psychiatrist's office, hands shot up across the Flying Seed, a common lounge at CAPT. Among the five solutions, the healing power of food ultimately prevailed as a means to diffuse the tension.

"Do you like prata?" Natalie's best friend, Joel, ventured cavalierly.

Gradually, the conversation expanded. Audience members no longer spoke through the facilitators but to each other. A cluster seated in one of the front row sofas nudged their friend verbally and physically, sending a ripple of conversation and laughter through the section. People began to respond and interject. When Natalie and her boyfriend, Joel, have a fight on how to deal with Terence, a flurry of suggestions on the best lines to pacify her emerged.

"He should just apologise!"

"Not enough la."

"Okay, okay. I think he should say that he loves her, and he'll always be there for her..."

(Everyone cheers noisily)

The forum theatre began to run itself, which restored my faith in humanity, specifically the CAPT-inhabiting part of it. Even the resident fellows joined in. At the end of the play, Natalie once more withdrew into a depressive state. Audience members could then make a short "phone call" to her as her peers. The initial awkwardness at this direct involvement was broken by Dr Kankana, one of the college's non-resident fellows, "Hello? Natalie? Hi, I've been worried about you recently since you haven't been showing up to class. Do let me know if there's anything I can do, or if you need an extension on the assignment..."

These "phone calls" were meant to close the distance between the audience and the world of the play. I learnt a few years ago watching Hotel Rwanda that it's easy to watch an atrocity on the news and return to your dinner immediately. The sense that it's happening somewhere else, to someone else gives you the space to escape and ignore. By allowing the audience to imagine Natalie as a possible friend or family member, we tried to integrate this manifestation of mental illness into their own lives. We might not be particularly revolutionary, but we hope we've managed to start a conversation. Talking about something, so I've heard, is usually the best way to start making things better.



#### Alison Koh

Alison Koh, an English Literature major, served as Director of CAPTheatre (the in-house theatre interest group) from 2014 to 2016. Through CAPTheatre, she has been able to explore her interests in theatre and social issues, subsequently raising awareness of these topics among the college community. Being a member of CAPT has taught her something new every day.

# REVIVING MY GRANDMOTHER TONGUE

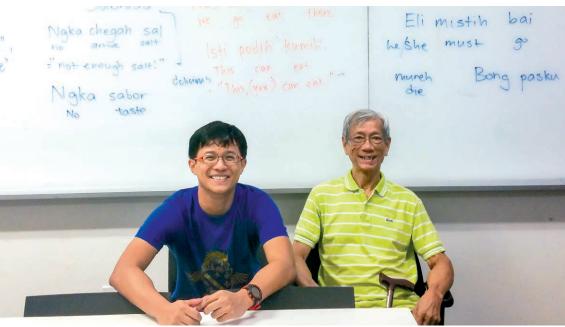


Photo Credit: FRANCES LOKE WEI

t's our grandmother tongue because both our grandmothers were the ones to speak it. Not our mothers," he always makes sure to remind me (and everyone else that we talk to about Kristang) — "Our mothers never learned the language. Kristang comes from our grandmothers. It's our grandmother tongue".

I met Mr Bernard Mesenas in early 2016, after putting out an advertisement in the *New Eurasian* for native speakers of Kristang who were interested in helping a young Portuguese-Eurasian boy do some research. During our initial sociolinguistic interview, I mentioned that I was interested in teaching Kristang to a new group of learners. Bernard was ecstatic.

Bernard learned Kristang from his grandmother, who once spoke the language to him when he was much younger. As Bernard grew older, the community began shifting away from Kristang to English. By the time I met him in 2016, he hadn't spoken Kristang in years, nor did he know of anyone from succeeding generations who was able to speak the language — or who wanted to learn it. "A real shame," he told me. "I am 78 years young, and I still speak this language. Yo mistih papiah Kristang. Kristang impodih mureh [I must speak Kristang. Kristang cannot die.]. "

Bernard and I started Kodrah Kristang (Awaken, Kristang) together in March 2016, bringing Kristang, our grandmother tongue, to the next generation. We teach Kristang to new adult learners interested in bringing the language back to life — be they Portuguese-Eurasian or otherwise, everyone is welcome at our classes. In addition to the usual language learning activities, we play board and card games developed explicitly for Kristang. Whenever necessary, we also work together to add new words to the language, which after years of neglect and decline is missing a significant amount of vocabulary.

Community building and engagement are tremendously important in language revitalization — in fact, they are essential to the initiative. A language cannot come back to life without a community that is actively using it. Especially for Kristang, revitalization is, at its core, a collaborative effort that doesn't just aim to teach the language to new speakers, but to raise awareness about it and its status, and highlight its complexity and legitimacy as a language alongside any other.

Unfortunately, for many elderly Eurasians, Kristang, or simply Portuguese, as it is known to many of the older generation, is a patois, a broken version of the 'real' Portuguese, spoken somewhere far beyond our shores. Other beliefs abound: it is widely, though mistakenly, claimed that Kristang is 'uncorrupted sixteenth century Portuguese', which is impossible, since the language has taken in so much from Malay that it is completely



Photo Credit: JEREMY OU

unrecognizable from both sixteenth century and modern day Portuguese. Where in Portuguese, for example, we would add an -s to indicate the plural, in Malay and in Kristang, we reduplicate nouns to do the same: barco ('boat') and barcos in Portuguese, barku and barku-barku in Kristang. Kristang is its own unique language, and something to be cherished. It is our own unique language that is part of the Eurasian community's 500-yearold history in Singapore, Malacca and the wider region. Bernard knows this, and Kodrah Kristang knows this too.



In the middle of class, I'll say something in Kristang, and it will trigger a flood of words and memories for Bernard.

Like Bernard, it was my grandmother who had been the last person in the family to speak Kristang — or rather, the last person to have heard Kristang spoken. For when I first broached the subject of Kristang to her, she claimed she knew just two phrases: bong dia, or good morning, and beng naki, or come here. As classes have gone on, she's come to attend with my Danishdescended Eurasian grandfather (who remembers a rather different set of things like ja kabah doi, the money is all finished), and in speaking with Bernard, so much of Kristang has returned. In the middle of class, I'll say something in Kristang, and it will trigger a flood of words and memories for Bernard: life as it was before independence, stories of old Malacca and the Portuguese Settlement, and words that no one has heard for a long time.

Today, Kristang is down to its last hundred or so speakers in Singapore, people like Bernard and my grandparents, who have memories of an earlier time, a time when the Portuguese-Eurasians had a language of their own. Kodrah Kristang and its home in CAPT bring together everyone who is interested in learning the grandmother tongue — Eurasians, non-Eurasians, students, national servicemen, marketing administrators, publishing editors, diplomats and primary school teachers. And my grandparents, and Bernard

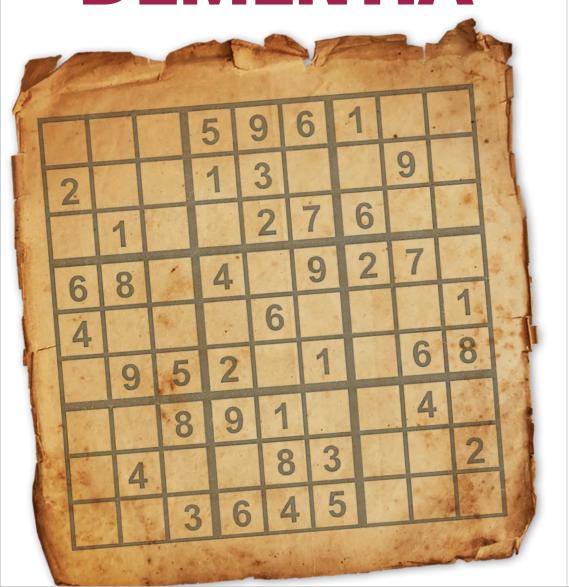
For a long time, I didn't think much of my own Portuguese-Eurasian heritage. I didn't know what it meant, or the traditions it was tied to, or the history and culture it represented. I had no idea that Kristang even existed because most older Eurasians still refer to it as Portuguese. When I discovered the language while working on a piece for *Unravel: The Accessible Linguistics* Magazine in January 2015, I discovered so much more beyond just Kristang; I discovered a part of me that I didn't even know was there. Many of the Kodrah Kristang learners report having the same experience. Some describe feeling fuller and more whole, as if something that was lost has been found.

Language, as we so often observe in our studies in linguistics, is very much tied to our identity. But it is tied to other things as well: the food we eat, the songs we sing, the communities we build, and the family we love. Our new and growing family includes our grandmothers, and everyone else who is learning this amazing and beautiful language.

#### **Kevin Martens Wong**

Kevin Martens Wong is a linguistics major, editor-in-chief of Unravel: The Accessible Linguistics Magazine and head of the Kodrah Kristang revitalization initiative, which seeks to revitalize the critically endangered language Kristang in Singapore. His first novel, Altered Straits, was published by Epigram Books in early 2017. Kevin has led a Capstone project entitled Words Apart: Literacy through Morphology, helped initiate CAPT's Minorities and Languages Reading Group, acted as Chair of CAPTISS 2016 and currently teaches Kristang in CAPT.

## RESPONDING TO DEMENTIA



an't you see that you are supposed to put the red tile in the red box?" Jane\* said in frustration.

Her husband replied, "De - men - tia, this is what this disease does to you. If not, why do people call it de - men-tia?"

She sighed and shook her head. A few minutes into the game, she gave up correcting her husband whenever he made a wrong move. It did seem ridiculously simple to people of normal cognitive ability.

Dementia has robbed the engineer, a 59-year-old well-groomed man, of his ability to retain new information and to enjoy his retirement. He had spent a good 30 years of his life working to sustain the family financially. As there is currently no cure for dementia, he can only expect his condition to worsen as he faces the likelihood of hallucinations, depression, the loss of his ability to walk, and eventually the loss of his identity.

In my mind, I was imagining how his upcoming years would unfold, if his loved ones failed to provide adequate love and support.

A deep sense of sadness overwhelmed me as I looked into the dark eyes of this man before me. In my mind, I was imagining how his upcoming years would unfold, and how difficult it might be if his loved ones failed to provide adequate love and support.

This was one of the incidents I witnessed since I started to volunteer at the Alzheimer's Disease Association in March. It all started when I was taking the *Family in a Changing Singapore* module in CAPT. We were tasked to look into a social issue and propose possible solutions. Reading up on dementia and hearing stories of dementia patients made me see first hand

the importance of family, especially in the context of a debilitating disorder. From my experience interacting with dementia patients, those who are blessed with a supportive and proactive loved one who constantly seeks ways to engage them in cognitive activities, seem to experience the slowest decline in cognitive functions.

One such example of a supportive and proactive caregiver is May\*, whom I think should deserve a best caregiver award. She wakes up at 7 am every morning to cut fruit and prepare oatmeal for her husband. She takes him on a walk after breakfast, and exercises with him by following a routine she learnt from the Dr Oz show. This is followed by engaging her husband in cognitive stimulating activities, such as puzzles and Sudoku, and then dinner, which is also meticulously prepared by her. She keeps a notebook filled with notes about dementia, experiments with using Montessori techniques in engaging her husband, and has even come up with a nutritional diet plan to ensure that he receives the optimum amount of nutrition. She believes that all of this has allowed her husband's condition to remain stable for seven years, without further decline in his cognitive abilities.

Although cognitive stimulation and strong caregiver support have been shown by research to help slow down the progression of dementia, some caregivers find it extremely challenging to do so. One caregiver told me that she used to search online and print coloring exercises and Sudoku puzzles for her husband. However, after a few months she gave up because she found this inconvenient. This makes it all the more important for organisations such as the Alzheimer's Disease Association to conduct therapy sessions in centres that are easily accessible, and to equip caregivers with the right training and tools so that they can better and more conveniently engage their loved ones at home.

After my interactions with dementia patients, it dawned on me that illnesses can strike any of our loved ones at any time without warning. It made me see how important supportive families are when this happens, and the huge role they can play in maintaining the patient's quality of life. I have

learnt to be more appreciative and grateful for my health and family. It has strengthened my resolve to help those who may not be as fortunate, which is why I strive to find ways to assist caregivers of patients with dementia reduce, in a small way, the already long list of responsibilities that come with caring for patients with dementia.

\*This name has been changed to protect the identity of the person.



#### Benjamin Ong

Benjamin Ong, a Business Analytics major, volunteered at Alzheimer's Disease Association from the period of March to July 2016. Through his volunteering experiences with the association, he has developed a strong interest in healthcare issues and a desire to better the lives of those who are struggling with medical conditions. Being a member of CAPT gave him the space and motivation to pursue his passions.

## ADVENTURES IN GARDENING



Photo Credit: CAPTURE

y name is Brian, and I am a gardener. My journey thus far has been an adventure, and like a plant, I have grown, as reflected in the lessons I have learnt and applied to the Community Garden in the Flying Seed balcony at CAPT, and the Gardens By the Way raised bed outside Theme Room 1, projects I have adopted and initiated respectively.

Firstly, I have learnt how plants can benefit from being paired with each other for mutual support, like how onions repel pests from carrots. Much like human communities, synergy, not isolation, seems to be the way forward. When I first joined CAPT, plants grown on our grounds were mainly ornamental. Few were edible and it appeared that little consideration was given to their impact on the surrounding ecosystem. I sought to change that in the establishment of the Community Garden. From the initial five or six varieties of plants present, there are now almost 30, mostly edible; if not, then useful varieties. To me, this brings us from a perfectly manicured, "clean" model of landscaping, to a more functional use of our green spaces.

Through learning about gardening and its many applications, I have seen that when you respect and work with nature rather than impose your will on her, the rewards are bountiful. When you piece together nature's components such that each adds to the vibrancy and diversity of the whole, you begin to see its intrinsic genius.

Secondly, permaculture – a holistic approach to sustainable living – whose principles I borrow from in caring for the gardens, has taught me more than just gardening techniques. I have learnt how to use gardening to care for the earth and others. With ownership of food production, complemented by a healthy respect for and understanding of nature, abundance naturally follows. For example, in nature, nothing is wasted, as nutrients are readily recycled, like how a fallen tree breaks down into simpler substances, nutrients that other plants can utilize, as time passes. This is something I strive to do through vermicomposting and composting on-site.

I may not be able to change the world in an instant, but I believe that I can do so one plant, one project at a time.

These practices allow our college to take food scraps and convert them (with help from bacteria and fungi, or in the case of vermicomposting, special earthworms) into a dark brown, soil-like substance which acts as fertilizer for plants. This act of returning fertility to nature results in higher vields, and the produce shared with others fills bellies and touches hearts simultaneously. One memory that stands out for me was when I harvested kangkong from the Community Garden to share with the dishwashing aunty in CAPT. She is always jovial, and I wanted to share a small token to affirm her friendly presence. Truth be told, it was not the best bunch of



vegetables I had ever harvested, but I think it made a difference to her. On passing the bag of vegetables to her, her face lit up with a huge grin, visibly surprised and appreciative of my gift to her. She thanked me repeatedly, and a week later, reciprocated with a small packet of chocolates – small tokens, great love, to paraphrase Blessed Mother Teresa. I believe in food's capability to unite people, whether in appreciating fresh produce from the garden, or in enjoying meals together. To that aunty, I hope it made her day better knowing that someone cared and put in the effort to prepare a gift for her, a practical one that she could definitely use. While it is true that good intentions do not a meal make, what I love about gardening is how pairing those intentions with hard work can have tangible returns.

One of my favourite parts of managing the gardens is giving tours to CAPTains and visitors. More than just a feast for the eyes (or the stomach, for that matter), I believe gardening should be a treat for all our senses, mind, and heart. Giving tours allows me the privilege of joining in others' journey of discovery: of new sights - "THAT'S how a chilli plant looks like?" and of smells - "This Kafir Lime leaf is what gives Tom Yum its smell?" and even of new paradigms - "You're telling me that by caring for the soil and mixing up species, I can plant densely, but still get higher yields? Cool!" These are some of the comments that participants have made during

these tours. I believe that bringing the food production process closer to people brings food closer to their hearts. When one has seen a plant grow from seedling to mature plant, and finally harvesting it, one is emotionally invested in that dish and less likely to waste it.

TEDx speaker Ron Finley once said "If kids grow kale, they'll eat kale. If they grow tomatoes, they'll eat tomatoes." Many people dislike vegetables, finding them disgusting and foreign even from a young age. I hope to replace this disgust with a sense of familiarity and connection to the produce. Moreover, I hope to teach CAPTains to use fresh produce to create delicious local dishes, giving them more incentive to eat their vegetables.

When I sign off garden-related posts on Angsana Marketplace, our college Facebook group, I always do so with #CAPTgardenadventures because that is what I firmly believe this is – an adventure of discovery, connection with people and nature, and of learning to make the world a better place. Through education, patience, elbow grease and a little help from nature, I hope to make the world a little greener. You can do your part as well. Small acts combined can make a large difference for our planet, such as learning where and how your food is grown, minimizing food wastage and, for those of us still in CAPT, joining the nascent Gardening Interest Group in CAPT for sessions, to pick up some hands-on gardening skills. The possibilities are endless. Will you join me on this adventure?

#### **Brian Thian**

Brian Thian, a Chemistry major, started the in-house Gardening interest group. With his group, he manages three garden plots – on the balcony, beside CAPT Café and outside Theme Room 1. He hopes that through regular exposure to edible plants, CAPTains will be able to develop an interest in growing their own food and conserving the environment. Brian is grateful to CAPT for reminding him that developing relationship adds meaning to service.

## A SPECIAL FRIENDSHIP



## College of Alice & Peter Tan



Photo Courtesty of JACQUELINE WOO AND GRACE YONG

### he Beginning

#### JAC

"Hi Jac!" a voice wafted behind me in the distance.

I, Jacqueline, or Jac, as my friends like to call me, turned around to see it was Grace. Being her usual sprightly self, she made her way towards me where I was waiting at the usual CAPT pick-up point for my transport to class that morning.

Just like Grace's energetic greeting that morning, or our neighbours' striking morning alarms in CAPT, some things in life jolt us awake. It may be a new discovery, a surprising truth, or perhaps certain relationships from which we discover new things. In our case, the friendship we came to share has been refreshingly insightful.

#### GRACE

The conversation we managed to strike up despite Jac's physical challenges that morning was unfamiliar, yet a crucial point in the nurturing of our friendship. I knew Jac as my floor-mate, but was unsure of who she was. Many questions raced through my mind. Was she a cool person who preferred to be alone? Would she want to be my friend, beyond simply a floor-mate? Was I understanding what she was saying accurately?

After some moments of confusion, I picked up Jac's question, "Can I get your number?", and her corresponding hand gesture for phone confirmed her statement. I was pleasantly surprised by her initiative to exchange phone numbers and keep in closer contact. True enough, it marked the start of one of the most precious relationships gained from our stay in CAPT.



"You want milk? Milo?"

"Fresh milk," Jac replied.

"Coffee?"

"Fresh milk."

"Fresh milk?"

"Yes please!" came the final confirmation.

"Okay!" Grace nodded in a victorious exclamation.

#### GRACE

Learning to communicate and complement each other's styles was a process that did not have any shortcuts. After weeks and months of absentmindedness or periods of miscommunication, I gradually learnt how to listen closely to Jac's body language and lip movement, allowing me to better interpret her expressions.

I also learnt to remember her preferences while being open to listening without letting my assumptions and guesses influence what I heard. I learnt how important it was not to attempt to finish Jac's sentences before she had finished speaking.

When we wanted to talk in-depth we would use her phone or laptop as I listened and she typed. Over time, our friendship grew when we opened up about our stories, beliefs and values, and our families. I was often touched by how much she trusted me, while being a very good listener too.

#### **Mutual Support**

#### JAC

As with every human relationship, misunderstandings due to our differences do occur, but these gave way to learning points and a closer relationship for us. While I preferred the cold, Grace took a greater liking to warm temperatures. While I was neat, Grace was messy by nature. We both firmly believe that differences, however, are not meant to be criticised, but celebrated for our individual uniqueness. It dawned on me that through working out our differences together, we have learnt to accommodate and embrace each other's traits, and explore new possibilities together. This made the friendship all the more precious in our sight.



Just like Grace's energetic greeting that morning, or our neighbours' striking morning alarms in CAPT, some things in life jolt us awake.

#### GRACE

"How do you take care of Jac?"

This was a question my friends sometimes asked me. It often caught me offguard because I had never seen our relationship as one of caretaker-receiver, but more of friends. At the same time it revealed the general public's less informed perception of our relationship as viewed from the outside. Upon further reflection and questioning whether our friendship was solely a functional exchange of service, I came to realise that Jac had influenced my life greatly. Being friends with her was not just a practical exchange to meet surface-level needs. Rather, our friendship was a continuous practice of loving and understanding each other. It was simply a friendship, no different from any other.

#### JAC

How can I support Grace and my other friends as well?

There is a proverb that goes, as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. This proverb has always and still runs through my mind when I receive acts of kindness and want to pay it forward. I had thought hard and long about it often, before I finally came to the conclusion that, perhaps, while my friends offered physical or tangible assistance, I could return in kind with the intangible. In the process of forging friendships, not only do we learn more about ourselves and what makes us tick, we also learn how to emanate love, joy, and care from each other.

This represents community as well. Some people may believe that in order for community to function, exchanges need to take place. Partners need to see some gain for themselves before they are willing to be a part of it and to give. However, this is not always the case. Every community involves humans, and when humans come into the picture, we bring with us love and empathy, we bring with us aspects that make us human. These things are often hard to measure in terms of exchanges, and our motivations to love others are simply a common desire shared across the human race.

#### **Final Reflections**

#### GRACE

Looking back, both of us can safely say that these past two years in CAPT have influenced us greatly. For me, it is through journeying through the big and small milestones of the past two years with Jac and witnessing her resilience and endearing perseverance as a student, a daughter, and a friend to those around her. And to me, Jac has been an elder sister and a friend, a

person whom I trust and love. This friendship has shown me how a simple friendship can be in its essence, how differences and gaps in communication or lifestyles are not as insurmountable as they seem.

#### JAC

To me, our friendship espouses the ideals of community engagement. It goes beyond the superficial level of hi-bye and small talk, to caring for each other on a personal level despite the obstacles, and to genuinely seeking each other as equals with different but complementary contributions. It is indeed heart-warming to have forged such a precious friendship.

Through the lenses of our friendship, we have seen how precious community in its larger sense is and the potential and power it holds. If not for the encouraging and supportive climate of CAPT, we would not have been able to practise this love for each other and others around us. We have learnt that serving and loving the community is a constant and consistent practice that needs to be a common thread throughout our lives, from the smallest of things to the larger picture.

#### Jacqueline Woo and Grace Yong

Jacqueline Woo, a History major, is graduating in 2017. Being a CAPTain from 2012 to 2016 has exposed her to people from many walks of life who often espouse character and creativity. She considers "bumping" into Grace here and the ensuing friendship as among her most treasured takeaways.

As a student with special needs in mainstream education, Jacqueline's presence is often a surprise to her peers and the general public. Around the age of three or four, she was diagnosed with Generalised Dystonia, a condition that gives her strong involuntary muscle movements and muscle tightness. Since it is difficult to stabilise her centre of gravity consistently, she uses a wheelchair outside of home. Moreover, as a result of the tightness, her vocal chords are also affected, making it a strain to articulate at a normal tone for prolonged periods. Her main modes of communication are thus short verbal responses augmented by hand signals, and typing for longer responses.

Grace Yong, a Social Work major, believes that her stay in CAPT during the first two years of her university experience has enhanced and deepened her understanding of what living and serving with and in the community looks like through both classes and in practice in her daily life and interactions in CAPT. Jac has been a big part of her daily life and growth in CAPT, and will be a friend she hopes to keep beyond her time here.

## The CAPT Pledge

With fellow CAPTains, I uphold the College's values:

Integrity, Audacity, Compassion, Teachability;
and I ACT to engage communities as an active citizen.

I am the steward of my personal growth and I ACT upon opportunities.

I am integral to the College Community and I ACT to reach out to its members.

I endeavour to actively contribute to the College, for I am a CAPTain, and will always be one.



THE COLLEGE OF ALICE & PETER TAN (CAPT) is a residential college with about 600 undergraduates from the many different faculties in the National University of Singapore.

CAPT has "Active Citizenship and Community Engagement" as its ethos. We learn about community engagement through formal avenues such as academic modules, seminars and conferences. We also have many opportunities for informal learning through overseas trips, volunteering and collaborations with local NGOs and government agencies.

The stories in this book tell of the experiences of CAPT students as they negotiate stereotypes and diversity in the course of these activities. These essays are snapshots of the learning at CAPT and they help us to think a little deeper about community issues around us, reminding us to go beyond the superficial by learning to meet and value real people in authentic situations.

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