

How to AGE well

JUDY WEE AND LEE POH LENG SHARE THE IMPORTANT LESSONS ON AGEING THEY HAVE PICKED UP AS VOLUNTEERS. BY NIRMALA SIVANATHAN

Keeping Active

JUDY WEE, 60
LIONS BEFRIENDERS
VOLUNTEER



IN 2002, JUDY WEE — THEN A HOUSING AGENT — was nearing retirement age when she decided

to sign up as a volunteer with Lions Befrienders. “I would be having more time on my hands, and I thought why not spend it meaningfully?” the sprightly sexagenarian says.

“Since then, I have found that volunteering with the elderly is very fulfilling. As a Lions Befriender, I visit seniors in their homes, interact with them and make sure they are eating well and taking their medicine regularly.”

The Lions Befrienders Service Association (Singapore) is a voluntary welfare organisation which aims to help improve the social, psycho-emotional and physical well-being of lonely seniors in the community.

Judy started volunteering with the organisation 10 years ago. Once a week, she visits seniors with limited or no family support, and who are at risk of isolation. The mother of a son aged 35 and a daughter aged 32, and grandmother of three even goes beyond the call of duty to visit the seniors when they are hospitalised. Judy also helps the staff of Lions Befrienders deliver items to the homes of the elderly.



INSTEAD OF BEING NEGATIVE ABOUT AGEING, I TELL MYSELF THAT THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO DO MORE

JUDY WEE SIGNED UP AS A VOLUNTEER WITH LIONS BEFRIENDERS WHEN SHE REALISED THAT SHE WOULD HAVE MORE FREE TIME IN HER RETIREMENT YEARS

“As I go on my rounds, I meet people both older and younger than myself,” Judy says. “Some are so alert despite their advanced age. Some suffer from memory loss and other problems despite being relatively younger. When you meet people like these, you know which category you would want to fall into when you get advanced in years.”

To this end, Judy has become more conscientious about monitoring her own health. Three years ago, she was diagnosed with a degenerative spinal condition so she has been exercising regularly to strengthen her back.

Luckily for Judy, keeping fit is not a chore. Together with her retired 61-year-old husband, she attends jazz dance and Zumba classes once a week, and plays golf twice a week.

An important lesson she has picked up from her time volunteering is to approach ageing with an open mind. “You can’t just stay at home. You need to get out there, keep active and learn new things,” she says.

“Instead of being negative about ageing, I tell myself that this is an opportunity for me to do more, and to keep up with my children by teaching myself to become IT-literate.”



PHOTO OF JUDY: STEVE ZHU. PHOTO OF POH LENG: WILSON PANG

Rewarding Pursuits

LEE POH LENG, 57
INSTITUTE OF MENTAL
HEALTH VOLUNTEER



FOUR TIMES EVERY WEEK, LEE

POH LENG leaves his home in Jurong West at 6.30am and travels to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) in Buangkok Drive, a journey that takes him one and a half hours by public transport. He has made the trip religiously for the past 13 years since becoming a volunteer with IMH.

The retiree first started volunteering after he had attended an Open House at the institute. Poh Leng was then a Human Resource manager with an IT company. The Open House invited members of the public to visit IMH and understand its work.

"Signing up as a volunteer was a chance to do something different. I wanted to challenge the stigma surrounding mental illness," Poh Leng says. "I also felt the need to give something back to society since I have been so blessed in my own life."

He helps out at the long-stay wards which include some adult, children and geriatric wards. Patients at these wards suffer from mental illnesses such as depression, schizophrenia and psychosis.

"We sing along with them, play games and give them a chance to interact with others," says Poh Leng, who has two sons aged 35 and 29. "The patients are here for extended periods of time so you get the chance to get to build a rapport with them."

POH LENG DEVOTES FOUR DAYS A WEEK AT IMH, INTERACTING WITH MENTAL PATIENTS SUFFERING FROM ILLNESSES SUCH AS DEPRESSION AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

In 2010, Poh Leng joined the IMH as a part-time volunteer coordinator. These days, he works two days a week on an official basis and comes in for an additional two days as a volunteer. As a volunteer coordinator, he has initiated programmes such as the Volunteers-Recruit-Volunteers scheme and planned outings and activities for patients.

In his free time, Poh Leng also volunteers with grassroots activities in the South West Community



I DON'T WANT TO BECOME A BURDEN TO MY CHILDREN IN MY OLD AGE, SO I TRY TO SPEND WITHIN MY MEANS, EXERCISE MORE, AND CONTROL MY DIET

Development Council and helps out at the National Library Board with community outreach programmes.

Working with patients at IMH has definitely changed his outlook on ageing. "I don't want to become a burden to my children in my old age," he says. "So I try to spend within my means, exercise more and control my diet."

Having seen the effects of dementia on some of the geriatric patients he works with, Poh Leng also understands the importance of staying mentally active after retirement. "If you are retired, find something to do," he says. "Don't just sit around at home. Get out. Do volunteer work. Read. Move about." **LV**

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEER WORK?

Here are some programmes to consider.

● GUIDING HANDS VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

This programme under the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics offers a range of volunteering opportunities for you to offer assistance and guidance to patients of

the polyclinics. For details, visit www.nhgp.com.sg/volunteer.

● IMH VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

Volunteers at the Institute of Mental Health play a vital role in normalising the lives of mental health patients by helping them to feel that they are not forsaken by society. Some of the work IMH volunteers do include planning and organising recreational activities, helping in

rehabilitative activities such as grooming and basic social skills and providing a listening ear to patients. More details at www.imh.com.sg.

● TTSH VOLUNTEER AND PATIENT SUPPORT GROUPS

Tan Tock Seng Hospital offers volunteers of all stripes diverse opportunities to provide support in more ways than one. TTSH has 16 Volunteer and Patient

Support Groups. Volunteer Support Programmes include the Community Health Engagement Programme that aims to encourage seniors to embark on a healthy and active lifestyle; the Stroke Support Group that provides psycho-social support and counselling to stroke survivors; and the Night Sitters Programme to keep watch over fall-risk patients. More information at www.ttsh.com.sg/about-us.