

Mr Wilson Peh is surprised at how far he has come. He says he believes his late mother would be proud of who he is today – from once being a youth at risk to now helping others at risk.
ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN



MOTIVATED BY GUILT
The last thing she told me before she died was, don't go back to your old ways. Those were her last words to me and it hit me the hardest. I felt she had suffered a stroke because of me. That she would still be well if not for me. I felt very guilty and that guilt motivated me to change.

MR WILSON PEH on his mother who collapsed when police came to their home to arrest him for assault when he was 15. She died about three years after the stroke.

GenerationGrit

He promised dying mother he'd never go back to his old ways

The guilt of causing his mother's death made him shake off his gangster past. Today, Wilson Peh counsels troubled youth. This is the latest in a series on millennials who have beaten the odds.

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

Moments after she saw her 15-year-old son arrested by the police in their flat for assault, Wilson Peh's mother collapsed in front of him. The hairdresser had suffered a stroke.

Although she was able to walk with the aid of a walking stick after the stroke, she never recovered from that traumatic episode. Eventually, she needed dialysis and developed other health problems.

At the age of 50, about three years after she had her stroke, she died of complications from a leg wound.

Mr Peh said: "The last thing she told me before she died was, don't go back to your old ways. Those were her last words to me and it hit me the hardest."

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His mother's death set him on a new path in life that he has not wavered from in the past 10 years. He

resolved to shake off his gangster, drug-addled past.

Mr Peh, 28, is now a youth worker at a charity, Youth Guidance Outreach Services (YGOS), counselling youth who are at risk of getting into trouble with the law or dropping out of school, as well as supervising staff at the charity.

He has come a long way from his troubled past, said Mr Too Seng Hong, 35, Mr Peh's counsellor when he was a teen. Mr Too, who is still a counsellor at YGOS, said: "His passion for young people is very strong and he will go the extra mile for the youth he works with. He has a strong conviction to help them not to go through what he went through. He really takes care of the youth and his staff."

The middle child of a taxi driver and a hairdresser, Mr Peh was an obedient child until he started mixing with the wrong crowd, he said.

When he was in Secondary 2, he joined a gang and got into all sorts of trouble. It culminated in the police coming to his home to arrest him for assault with a deadly weapon. He had used a penknife to attack members of a rival gang.

Though there is no definitive

From delinquent to youth mentor

SCAN TO WATCH

<https://str.sg/wilsonpeh>

proof that it was his arrest which led to his mother's stroke, in a sense it did not matter. He felt guilty enough that he stayed away from trouble for a few months after her collapse. Placed on probation for two years, he was ordered to attend a rehabilitation programme run by YGOS, where he met Mr Too.

But none of it got through to him. Instead, he fell deeper into gang life, and became hooked on drugs. To feed his habit, he turned to peddling small-time. He found he could easily make \$100 a day – enough to buy drugs as well as to splurge on clothes and other things.

He also started to skip school more often. His grades suffered and he was moved from the Express stream to the Normal (Academic) stream.

About a year after his first arrest, he was caught again by the police for fighting. This time, he was sent to a juvenile home for two years.

His second arrest left his parents heartbroken, although his father

would visit him faithfully at the home, and bring his favourite food.

His mother's health and mobility, however, had deteriorated to the point that she needed a wheelchair.

Seeing the pain and grief he had caused them, Mr Peh's heart was finally moved. He resolved to change so he would not disappoint them anymore.

But three months after his release, his mother died. He said: "I made a promise to my mum (on her deathbed): No matter what happens, I would never go back to my old ways."

Buoyed by the promise he had made to his dying mother, together with the love of his father and the guidance and support he received from Mr Too, Mr Peh started to turn his life around.

He said: "The idea of hurting my loved ones had a strong impact on me, seeing what my mum and my family went through with me. Being accountable to my loved ones means that I don't want to hurt them, knowing they really care."

After his release from the home, he enrolled in the Institute of Technical Education to study electronic engineering. He also earned a diploma in social work and another diploma in counselling. He has just started on a degree in counselling at the Executive Counselling and Training Academy, a private school.

He said of his decision to be a youth worker: "Seeing how my mother has been there for me, I want to be there for others as a youth worker as well. I feel I can give back and I feel I can better relate to the youth we work with given my experience."

Mr Peh said his work has been fulfilling and purposeful. He often tells the youth he is working with that if they do not try, they would never know if they could change for the better.

"I'm surprised how far I have come," he said. "I believe my mum would be proud of who I am today – that I was able to walk out of my old life – and what I'm doing now to help youth. I used to be a youth at risk and now I help youth at risk."

theresat@sph.com.sg

GENERATION GRIT
Know of someone aged 35 and below who has shown grit amid life's adversities? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

Volunteers tap technology to keep reaching out to the needy

Goh Yan Han

Even though he missed the camaraderie and socialising of his regular visits to the Muscular Dystrophy Association Singapore's (MDAS) centre in Bishan, Mr Timothy Chan was upbeat and in good spirits during a virtual meet-up with volunteers from Keppel Capital last month.

The asset management arm of Keppel Group had organised a series of sessions for its employees and MDAS clients using the Houseparty app, which allows up to eight people to play games and chat.

Volunteering amid the Covid-19 pandemic – and especially during the circuit breaker period from April 7 to June 1 – saw companies, organisations and social service agencies adapt and take many of their activities online, as well as create new programmes, to continue engaging with those in need.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Keppel volunteers would visit the MDAS centre. Now, they meet the MDAS clients virtually.

Mr Chan, 29, said he enjoyed the games, such as drawing out a word for others to guess. "I wanted to

play for longer," he added.

Ms Grace Chia, 40, Keppel's head of investor relations who is on the corporate social responsibility team and also a volunteer herself, said: "The circuit breaker and safe distancing measures should not stop us from doing good."

Another company that has moved its volunteer work online is insurer Prudential, which has been running engagement sessions with Thong Tekk Home for Senior Citizens and the Alzheimer's Disease Association online since the middle of last month.

Social service agencies have also moved their existing programmes online, such as Touch Community Services' Touch Young Arrows (TYA) programme and Beyond Social Services' Learning is Fun and Exciting programme.

The weekly TYA sessions were usually held in small groups. Volunteers would impart values as well as give tuition to the children.

Last month, 300 volunteers and 300 children began using Zoom instead. For many volunteers, including Mr Thomas Tan, 33, who has been with TYA for 12 years, it was their first time moving online, but doing so was necessary.

"We are not just tuition teachers, but we are also mentors and, for some, a 'sibling'," said Mr Tan.

Other organisations have created new activities during this period.

St Luke's Hospital has started a daily breakfast show with music and interview segments, that is broadcast over its announcement system and hosted by life coach and volunteer Timothy Khoo, 55.

Homeless Hearts of Singapore, which has been allowed to continue some walkabouts to reach out to homeless people, has tried to minimise exposure by checking in on them via WhatsApp. But befriending the homeless is better done in person, said the group's co-founder, Mr Mervin Lee, 39.

While many organisations have been doing their best to adapt and continue serving those in need, it has not been an easy transition.

Touch Community Services said it lost half its volunteers for the Meals-on-Wheels programme after the disease outbreak alert level was raised to orange in February. It has since recruited enough people after an online drive and appeals to firms and individuals.

Beyond Social Services' volunteer manager, Ms Chiu Ying Yik, said the



Mr Jeremy Hugon Kosman of Volunteer Guitar Connection bringing music to a resident of St Luke's Hospital through a video call. PHOTO: ST LUKE'S HOSPITAL

number of people allowed to volunteer in person was limited during the circuit breaker. Also, some activities, such as football, cannot be replicated online, she added.

But there is a silver lining. Being able to volunteer from home has made volunteering more accessible. Mr Jeremy Hugon Kosman, 30,

chairman of Volunteer Guitar Connection, who, with his team, provides song and cheer to patients at St Luke's through video calls, said he has more flexibility in joining the sessions as he does not have to travel to the hospital in Bukit Batok and back to his home in the east.

Technology has helped a lot in

this transition.

For Homeless Hearts, the circuit breaker period coincided with the roll-out of its new Web app, which allows volunteers to fill different forms to help in various ways. As of the end of last month, more than 250 forms had been submitted, said the group's co-founder Abraham Yeo, 38. This makes it easier for the group to find the homeless and address their needs.

Lions Befrienders chairman Anthony Tay said volunteering methods have always been dynamic and the group has had to redesign some roles to keep up with the changes.

"While physical interactions remain a core component of our volunteering opportunities, the online mediums complement our existing volunteering methods and will be here to stay," he added.

Beyond's Ms Chiu said "digital volunteerism" is likely to be part of the new norm and Beyond is working on a training programme to equip volunteers with skills to make online learning interesting and interactive.

A National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre spokesman said the current pandemic has made the existing cracks in society more obvious. The centre has released an online guide on how to help others during this time. "As the needs of the various communities in need come to light, those of us who are empowered with the abilities and resources have a 'responsibility' to uplift them," she said.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg