

01 February 2010: PeaceConnect and Volunteers' work

“Pride, distrust or difficulty hearing the knock on the door? Volunteers say it’s tough helping elderly residents.” The New Paper article by Maureen Koh.



## STREET TALK

# 'I don't need charity. I have hands and legs'

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UNTIL you walk the blocks, it's hard to imagine you could be turned away. Even if you are bearing gifts of goodwill – with no strings attached.

I found this out the hard way after spending 23 hours in total combing through six blocks of one-room flats at Beach Road and North Bridge Road last week.

Not that the residents were fierce or rude – well, except for an old man at Block 9.

He opened the door and glared at this "intruder", before asking in Hokkien: "What.Do.You.Want?"

Each word was uttered with such force that I took an unconscious step back, especially when I realised he was holding a basin of murky-looking water.

Explaining that I was there to distribute some food items for the festive season, I asked him if he had any beverage preference, like coffee, Milo or...

Before I could continue, he glared again and said: "I'm not a beggar. Get lost. Or I will throw this water at you."

Then the door slammed shut.

And my level of confidence dipped. It's easy to feel discouraged – especially when you can hear shuffling feet behind the door or catch a hint of a shadow through the peephole.

Calling out and explaining that you've come in good faith may not help.

At another unit in Block 4, an old woman rejected my bag of a tin of biscuits, a pack of three-in-one cereal and Milo.

She said in Cantonese: "I don't need charity. I have hands and legs."

Ask her gently if she finds difficulty getting around in her wheelchair, she said: "I just need to move around in this flat."

The neighbour, who lives across her unit, beckoned me over. He said: "Don't bother about her. She'd rather starve than accept help."

"Don't worry about her, if anything happens, I'll call Peace-Connect or the police."

The 78-year-old neighbour, who wanted to be known only as Mr Lim, declined to accept the bag of food too.

"My children come to visit me every week and take me out for meals," he said.

And it's neighbours such as Mr Lim who are the first-line helpers, said Mrs Lucy Tan, Peace-Connect's centre manager.

She pointed out: "They are the ones that even Seniors Activity Centre's (SAC) staff depend on. If a death can 'escape' detection by immediate neighbours, any SAC may be too far to help."

Another challenge facing MP Denise Phua is residents who do not qualify for financial aid schemes.

Ms Phua said: "Some of them have adult children or siblings who live elsewhere whom they don't want to disturb."

One resident, who lives with his wife at Block 7, has five daughters.

The 83-year-old man, who asked not to be named, said: "All my daughters have their own families to worry about."

"They have their own burdens, so my wife and I find it hard to ask them for money."

But even the elderly folk who spend their time at void decks may not welcome the "friendly" chats.

Most of them just turned away when I attempted to speak to them – mind you, I was not there as a reporter.

Mr Mohd Yusoff Karim, 69, was a rare find. He said in Malay: "We just want to sit here for the angin (breeze)."

"We don't like to be verbal (chit-chat) so much."

Despite the daunting task of trying to reach out to the elderly and the lonely, volunteers and grassroots leaders refuse to give up, despite the questions that arise after another body is found after days in a one-room flat.

Ms Phua said it's important not to discourage the volunteers especially the enthusiastic youth.

She said: "Give constructive ideas. Better still, give your time and talent."

"Offer time, resource, ideas and help make things happen for the needy, elderly, disabled in the community."

Which I did. And I took delight in it when I still managed to distribute all 150 bags of daily necessities.

# Knock, knock...

## 'GO AWAY'

*Pride, distrust or difficulty hearing the knock on the door? Volunteers say it's tough helping elderly residents. MAUREEN KOH reports*

YOU'RE 87, broke, need a four-legged walker to move around and your children hardly visit. Wouldn't you welcome someone offering free food and company into your spartan one-room flat? Guess what. Not many would.

When I knocked on 600 doors of one-room flats at Beach Road and North Bridge Road in the Kampong Glam estate with free bags of coffee, milo, biscuits and instant cereals to give away, I had doors slammed in my face. (See report on facing page.)

Some ignore the knocking and refuse to open their doors. Others chase well-meaning visitors away.

There are about 1,200 elderly residents living in 21 blocks in Kampong Glam, six of which are blocks of one-room flats.

Pride, self-imposed isolation and even distrust leave doors closed.

Resident Ah Mui, 87, told The New Paper in Hakka: "I've learned not to depend on anyone – if my own children can abandon me, so can the strangers."

She has two sons "who have their own families" and a daughter "who visits her once or twice a year".

She needs a four-legged walker to help her move around and depends on her room-mate to help buy her packet lunch before she leaves for work.

Ah Mui does not welcome visitors into the home because she dislikes having to answer "nosy questions about my health".

**Pride stops her from accepting offers of food rations, admitted Ah Mui.**

"Why should strangers feed me when my own children don't bother?" she asked.

She told this reporter: "Please, take your bag of goodies and give it to others who will appreciate them."

With a nod of silent thanks, she closed the door on us.

Ms Denise Phua, MP for the ward in the Jalan Besar GRC, told The New Paper: "It's hard to gain access to about 40 per cent of these households."

Ms Phua – along with her grassroots leaders and

other volunteers – comb the blocks weekly.

She said: "We knock on every door to find out their needs and concerns but we can usually reach out to only about 60 per cent."

Peace-Connect Neighbourhood Link, a voluntary welfare organisation with a special role as an elderly-service provider, focuses on the 1,904 units in the six blocks. It also manages the Alert Alarm System installed in Blocks 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9.

Centre manager Lucy Tan told The New Paper that house visits are "only about 25 per cent successful".

She said: "But we can't be certain if it's plain refusal to open doors or the residents are not in or that they cannot hear our knocks."

Two teams consisting of two to three staff members and volunteers walk the blocks once a week. Each team covers about 80 units in their two-hour shift.

She added: "For those whom we know are ill or are referred to by medical social workers, the visits can be daily or on alternate days."

Mrs Tan said that the saddest thing is that they can "knock on their door at 10am, but a resident may fall at 2pm and we won't even know".

But when a tragedy – like that of Mr Cheng Wei Pak, 56, whose rotting body was found only two days after his death – happens, a sense of helplessness or guilt hits everyone involved.

The New Paper reported last week how neighbours discovered Mr Cheng's death on 23 Jan only after they heard his helpless and starving sister crying out for food.

Madam Cheng Ah Chun, 80, is now warded at the Alexandra Hospital and is expected to be sent to a nursing home upon her discharge.

Mrs Tan said: "At first, we'd feel pangs of guilt, (then ask) like how come, why and what else (should we

**HELPING OUT:** (Above) Kampong Glam has about 1,200 elderly residents living in 21 blocks, six of which are blocks of one-room flats. (Right) For those who cannot afford decent quality lunches, Peace-Connect provides cheap meals at the centre from Mondays to Fridays.



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have done).

"But now, we're more concerned about the living, that is, the family left behind."

It does not help that the one-room units have no openings – such as windows – towards the common corridors. To get around the issue, the teams advise the residents to keep their doors open – with the metal gates padlocked – for better ventilation and visual access.

She is happy to note "we've received positive feed-

back on this from both residents and visit teams".

Mrs Tan and her team of two full-time colleagues – together with the volunteers – at Peace-Connect also prefer to focus on drawing more residents to the centre. It is here that members find solace and fellowship among their neighbours through a variety of activities.

And for those who cannot afford decent lunches, Peace-Connect provides meals for 50 cents – subsidised by the Kampong Glam Community Club – at the centre from Mondays to Fridays.

Free breakfast and tea are also provided on weekdays, while on Saturdays, members get free packed lunches.

Madam Lee Ah Tho, 75, eats regularly at the centre. She said: "There's nothing to feel ashamed about accepting help."

"It's only when we take advantage of the system or other people's kindness that is bad."

Madam Lee, who is single, added: "But if we choose to turn people away because of our pride, there's nothing anyone can do, right?"