

# Undergrads befriend families with children living in rental flats

**Shermaine Ang**

Social work undergraduate Nur Iliyana Iskandar is a volunteer who helps two families living in public rental housing.

Over the past six months, she has grown close to the children, who she helped prepare for the Primary School Leaving Examination through tuition, chats and letter-writing activities.

The 21-year-old plans to take them on an outing to an escape room after the exam.

“You go into this thinking that you’re going to support them, but actually they are supporting you and giving you so many learning opportunities,” she said.

She recounted how the children

told her they viewed the high-stakes national exam as a video game – they have to pass it to get to the next level.

Her volunteer efforts are part of a service learning course in her studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). In a collaboration with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) announced on Friday, NUS students like Ms Iliyana befriend families under MSF’s ComLink programme, which supports families with children living in rental housing.

Ms Pamela Yeh, course lead for communities and engagement in NUS’ social work department, said the course was piloted in August 2022 to give students a meaningful volunteer experience, where they can learn about real-world complexities.

Students are required to visit the families monthly during the year-long course, and to reflect on their experiences, picking up skills such as conflict management in the process, she said.

Announcing the NUS-MSF tie-up, Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said on Friday that about 430 NUS students have joined ComLink as befrienders. They form the largest group of volunteer befrienders from any organisation to date. NUS has plans to grow this volunteer pool to 1,000 students, she added.

Ms Sun was speaking at an event at NUS on Friday to show appreciation to young people who contributed to Forward Singapore. Forward SG is a year-long public consultation to renew the social compact and chart a road map for Singapore for the next decade. A report on the exercise will be released in late October.

A group of students from post-secondary institutions presented their recommendations on strengthening social mobility to MSF on Friday at NUS. The recommendations represent the views of 270 participants in four earlier Forward SG engagements.

The six recommendations cover three areas: strengthening social

support for disadvantaged families; increasing awareness of and access to social support schemes; and broadening definitions of success and recognising more pathways to success.

On strengthening social support, the students pointed out the limitations of existing financial literacy courses in enabling self-reliance for such families. They proposed getting befrienders to tailor financial literacy programmes to individual family circumstances, and having banks create financial products which encourage savings, such as small fixed-deposit schemes and shorter-term savings plans, to allow lower-income families to build assets.

To raise awareness of the social support available, the students proposed that their peers be briefed at the annual SG Cares Giving Week, and then mobilised as volunteers to inform the community.

They also proposed that the Government make it easier for lower-income families to seek help by creating a one-stop portal to apply for social service schemes.

On diversifying definitions of success, the students proposed lowering the barriers of entry to mentoring, apprenticeships and

internships, for instance, through shorter-term or hybrid work opportunities. They also suggested having more social media coverage celebrating the contributions of “hand” and “heart” work, such as cleaners and hawkers, to cultivate a more inclusive meritocracy.

Ms Sun said participants in the Forward SG sessions have discussed the complex challenges lower-income families face. These include the lack of awareness of social support, the stigma of reaching out for help, and the lack of access to employment networks which would allow their youth to advance in life.

She added that she heard personal stories from participants – one felt ashamed about the violence happening at home, while another is a student who could not afford to go on overseas exchange programmes.

Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli, who also attended Friday’s event, said there is a need to move from more sporadic giving to sustained giving, and encouraged those who have benefited from the system and achieved success to give back.

Forward SG participant Low Pin Jia, 20, who graduated from Singapore Polytechnic in May with a Di-

ploma in Human Resource Management with Psychology, said she is keen on shaping the futures of disadvantaged children.

Ms Low, who now works at Youth Corps Singapore under the National Youth Council, highlighted the recommendation to bundle children’s and parents’ savings accounts to get higher interest rates based on their combined savings.

“Families are motivated to actually continue seeking support and learning about financial literacy for their kids more than for themselves,” she said.

She added that she has been challenged to rethink her assumptions: While she was volunteering with children living in public rental flats, she discovered the reason one Primary 1 pupil was not interested in lessons was that she found them too easy.

Ms Low said she hopes to see everyone contributing to the refreshed social compact.

“Not just coming from a place of ‘You need help, then I help you’, but to see each other’s strengths instead of weaknesses, to see how we can complement each other with our different strengths and weaknesses,” she said.

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