

NUS students befriend seniors as part of year-long course

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When third-year National University of Singapore (NUS) business undergraduate Bridget Ho visited a woman in her 80s at her flat in Farrer Road, she and her classmate would be asked to leave after half an hour when the senior wanted to rest.

But showing up week after week, Ms Ho, 25, discovered the senior used to be a tailor and shared her interest in crochet. Over time, with constant prompting, the older woman started to open up.

"I was very happy to see her smile," said Ms Ho, adding that for a long time, the woman had not interacted with anyone apart from a helper she lived with, and was not used to visitors.

Ms Ho is among about 1,000 NUS students who befriended seniors at active ageing centres (AACs), where seniors have access to social activities, or took part in the Agency for Integrated Care's (AIC) Silver Generation Ambassadors programme,

where volunteers visit seniors at home to talk to them about preventive health.

The weekly visits Ms Ho paid to the older woman over eight months were part of an NUS service-learning course she completed this year.

The year-long, credit-bearing course, piloted this year, is the result of a tie-up between AIC and NUS that was inked on Thursday. It aims to engage more than 2,000 students a year in volunteering with seniors.

A memorandum of understanding was signed to promote volunteerism in the community care sector. Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing attended the event at NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre in Bukit Batok.

He said in a Facebook post that befriending programmes at AACs can create shared experiences through intergenerational bonding.

"I think both young and old have much to learn from each other. Time spent together is good for the heart, and for the soul."



Senior citizens taking part in a chair exercise and dancing activity on Thursday at the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre in Bukit Batok, where a memorandum of understanding was signed to promote volunteerism. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

NUS now offers two year-long, service-learning courses as part of its general education curriculum. The courses, run by the department of social work, teach students how to communicate with empathy and civic consciousness to prepare them to engage seniors. Students taking the Reconnect

SeniorsSG course serve as befrienders, meeting seniors regularly to accompany them on walks and visits to the AAC, market or clinic.

Those taking the Support Healthy AgeingSG course visit seniors in their homes to inform them of government schemes and activities, and better understand

their needs.

Ms Ong Mui Hong, director of NUS Communities and Engagement, said the service-learning courses "provide a valuable opportunity for all students to think deeper about societal issues while taking constructive actions to advance social services and community building".

Mr Sng Hock Lin, chief of the Silver Generation Office which oversees the Silver Generation Ambassadors programme, said he is also working with corporate volunteers and hopes to engage more institutes of higher education in volunteering with seniors.

To encourage working adults to give their time, volunteer opportunities should be more flexible, he added. For instance, they can visit seniors in groups of five, so that the sessions can still go on even if some are unable to make it.

During her visits, Ms Ho and her classmate taught the older woman origami, or the art of folding paper. After learning a design, the senior would fold a bagful of origami, and show it to them during the next

visit.

She said the senior was grateful when she bought her a glucometer to replace her broken one to monitor her blood sugar level for her diabetes.

Now, Ms Ho cherishes her own grandparents more and takes a greater interest in their lives. "I went home to spend quality time with my grandmother and find out what she likes to do."

Madam Ng Yee Chan, 84, enjoys having the students visit. It is the only time she gets to interact with others apart from her youngest son and her helper, whom she lives with.

Being visually impaired, she does not get to leave home often due to the risk of falling. "I like when they visit, and I can chat with them," she said. "They dote on me and hold my hand."

Madam Ng also enjoys going out for walks with the student volunteers. She said she misses her five grandchildren, whom she cared for when they were young but are now too busy to visit.

"I try not to think too much, because doctors tell me I must be happy, then I will be healthy," she added.

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