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Social workers share how “journeying with clients far outweighs the challenges” of a difficult job

March is Social Work Month. *Salt&Light* applauds all who work tirelessly in the social services sector for the good of the community!

Care Corner // March 25, 2020, 4:56 pm

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n March 12, 2020, our Prime Minister addressed the nation for the second time on the COVID-19 situation. He thanked the frontline staff for working extremely hard to keep

Singapore going.

He also spoke on the importance of the social and psychological resilience of our people, how Singapore can be different from other countries in not leaving anyone behind.

This is SG United.



**“Religion which is
accepted as pure and
faultless is to look after
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their distress.”**

On this note, another group of professionals who are strengthening social resilience and keeping Singapore going is our social workers.

This year, the World Social Work Day was commemorated on March 17, 2020, and traditionally in the entire month of March.

With coronavirus being declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization, some of us may suffer some inconvenience due to the latest travel advisories. However, there are many in our midst who struggle with the fears of contracting the COVID-19 while they earn their daily wages and are overwhelmed by other complex life challenges.

For example, a couple in their 40s, with seven children ranging from one- to 16-years-old, are living in rental housing. They are badly affected by the current situation. The couple had initially hoped to seek new employment with their health conditions stabilising early this year, only to have interviews and job opportunities cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation. The family is currently supported by Care Corner’s Family Service Centre in Queenstown.



Caleb (2nd from left) with his colleagues in an informal team bonding activity. Photo courtesy of Care Corner.

Two social workers, Flora Tan and Caleb Wong, spoke (via teleconferencing, of course!) from Care Corner Singapore about their journey as social workers.

Both were awarded the Social Service Scholarship by the National Council of Social Service.

Caleb Wong, 29, graduated from the National University of Singapore with a social work degree and has been in the sector for four years. Originally intending to major in psychology, he switched to social work and is now a social worker with Care Corner Family Service Centre in Queenstown.

Flora Tan, 25, also graduated from the National University of Singapore. She had considered entering the teaching profession, however she felt that social work would offer greater opportunities to interface with adolescents. She is now a social worker with Care Corner Youth Services.

What drew you to the social service sector?

Caleb: I took the social work introductory module as an elective in my first year of study. Being a Christian, I was deeply touched by the lecturer’s personal sharing about her motivations for joining social work – that religion, which is accepted as pure and faultless, is to look after orphans and widows in their distress. Hence, I decided to switch my first major to Social Work.

Flora: I originally wanted to be a teacher, but after a conversation with a few teacher friends, I decided to embark on a social work education. I currently conduct preventive and developmental programmes in the community, which include working with children and adolescents from low-income families. At the same time, I also get my hands into designing and implementing innovative practices to intervene along the educational pathway for adolescent development.



Both Flora (3rd from right) and Caleb said having supportive bosses and loving colleagues, with the same mission to bring care and hope to the needy, were critical to their daily well-being. Photo courtesy of Care Corner.

What are some memorable experiences in your work?

Flora: One memorable experience is my involvement with 12 Primary six students. They displayed juvenile delinquency and behavioural issues in school. So they were identified for the therapeutic woodworking programme “Make up Your Mind” where they created various kinds of woodwork items.

“I felt so alone. But
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learn to be strong.”

During one of the sessions, a participant broke down and went to the toilet to cry. After I calmed him down, he shared that his parents had quarrelled the previous night and he felt lonely and misunderstood. It did not help that some of his classmates called him names and he felt stigmatised by his learning challenges.

After 12 sessions and much relationship and confidence building, the finished products were auctioned off and the proceeds donated to a children’s charity. The boy exclaimed that he had now learnt to better communicate with his teachers and friends.

All 12 programme participants are no longer on the school’s detention list. They now experience a greater sense of belonging to their school as they witnessed the belief their teachers had in them through the programme.



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Caleb: I remember working with a mother of five children who was in her 30s. Her children were temporarily placed under foster care due to difficulties at home.

She was already very distressed by her marital conflicts and experienced a deep sense of loss and hopelessness when the children were taken away. She was suicidal and was subsequently treated at the Institute for Mental Health.

Though she is currently staying alone, she is willing to work with the relevant agencies to stabilise her life as she looks forward to having her children back to live with her in the future.

These words from this mother left a profound impression on me. She said: “I felt so alone. But because you care and you are helping me, I can learn to be strong.”

What encourages you when you face challenging situations?

Flora: My manager and social work mentor always encouraged me to look at the growth achieved by my clients no matter how small they may seem.

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“We never know how the impact of our words and actions can bring hope to them.”

I remember one time I was standing at the corridor waiting for my client to open the gate. I was rather despondent as I did not seem to be making any progress with this teenager.

The beam of light at the end of the corridor gave me great comfort and hope.

That brought to my mind that we are to be the light to those in need and we never know how the impact of our words and actions can bring hope to them.



Flora recalls how she once stood in this corridor in despondence but found encouragement in seeing the light shine through. Photo courtesy of Care Corner.

Caleb: Due to the nature of our work, emotional tensions remain a very real struggle for social workers. I remember a period where I was handling a few family violence cases and was unable to contact them. I was anxious and concerned for the families' well-being.

By the end of the day, I was desperate and prayed to God to intervene and perform a miracle to keep them safe.

Although I briefly forgot about the prayer, I experienced the miracle where all of the clients contacted me the following day and agreed to work with us to improve their personal and family well-being. I felt very grateful for this turn of events and was reminded to pray whenever I encounter difficult situations at

work.

What are your aspirations and wishes for the community?

Caleb: I wish to see healing take place in families. My prayer is that individuals will refocus on their families, invest in quality time with them and redeem broken relationships.

Recently, I was supporting a couple going through some marital issues. One spouse had family members residing in a country severely affected by COVID-19. The uncertainty surrounding what to do (return to the country or not) caused significant tension in their relationship, but they have continued to stay together thus far to tackle the uncertainties as a couple.



“My prayer is that people will invest time and redeem broken relationships in their families.”

Flora: Studies have shown that adolescents can have a second window of development to offset deficiencies in early childhood development. I hope to change the public perspective of adolescents and this period of development.

I am currently working on MindBlown, a programme which focuses on the development of Executive Function and life skills in adolescents through building their capabilities and enhancing their learning experience.

My desire is that the community will come alongside all our children going through their teenage years, especially with those who are not doing well in school at the moment, helping them achieve and succeed.

What would you say to those who want to participate in the cause of social work?

Caleb: We need to experience love ourselves before we can learn to love others. Social work is hard work but experiencing personal growth and journeying with our clients in their growth journey far outweighs the challenges.



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Flora: Social work is more than helping people or doing a good deed. It's really about changing mindsets and shifting systems so that everyone has the opportunity to attain their best potential. So, I would really encourage you to have a personal reflection on your whole values and beliefs and whether they align with the social work profession.

Society is indebted to all social workers and the many who are involved in the delivery of social work. Your work is one that focuses on building trust and improving the well-being of individuals and families, especially during this turbulent times.