

She's blind, but looks after dementia-hit hubby

Couple get by with help from charity group

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A week after she returned from hospital, Madam Choy Chew Gip found herself lost in her own home.

The 74-year-old woman had become blind after several months of chemotherapy for colon cancer.

As if that was not bad enough, her elderly husband had also become increasingly dependent on her due to dementia.

He sometimes couldn't find his own way home and he occasionally soiled himself.

That was six years ago.

Today, Madam Choy, 80, still cooks, cleans, and sells handicraft despite her blindness and is the sole caregiver to her 83-year-old husband, Mr How Fook Cheong.

She is able to do all that because she has the support of volunteers from the Lions Befrienders, who provide a listening ear, give them occasional food rations and also take them for excursions.

The welfare group reaches out to the lonely and needy elderly here. (See other report.)

Recounting her ordeal after she lost her sight in August 2002, Madam Choy said in Cantonese: "For a week, I didn't dare move around at home. I would knock into something wherever I turned. I was lost, confused and frustrated."

Even venturing out of her room in her two-room rental flat at Toa Payoh was a challenge. She said: "I walked into furniture. I knocked things over. I tripped and fell. When I tried to boil water or cook, I scalded myself."

Mr How, a retired trishaw rider, could offer little help.

Said Madam Choy: "He could not remember where he put his own things and he repeated himself a lot. He could not recognise friends."

"Sometimes, he would go for a walk and then call home that he had lost his way."

Mr How's condition got worse.

In 2003, he was diagnosed as having dementia after a volunteer from Touch Community Services took him to a doctor.

Hard life

Taking care of her husband for the past few years has been a struggle for Madam Choy. She said: "He has run away from home so many times, I can no longer count."

"Because I cannot see, he would sneak out in the morning. I would get a call from either a stranger or the police late at night to say that he had got lost somewhere."

"He would not have money on him to take a cab home. Many times, kind strangers have helped to take him home."

At home, she often had to clean up after



THEY NEED HELP: Madam Choy Chew Gip, 80, is completely blind, but cooks for and looks after her husband, Mr How Fook Cheong, 83, who has severe dementia. TNP PICTURES: JONATHAN CHOO

him when he soiled himself.

"Once, I almost slipped when I stepped on his faeces."

"In the beginning, I wouldn't even know he had soiled himself until I smelt it or felt he was wet or sticky."

Before being diagnosed with cancer, Madam Choy supported the family by doing odd jobs, which earned her up to \$500 a month.

They have a son, a chef in his 50s, but they have not been in touch with him for six years.

Since 2001, the couple have been getting public assistance of \$570 a month, after a referral by a medical social worker at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

For the past six years, volunteers from the Touch Community Services have been visiting the couple once a week, helping them clean their home and taking them to the doctor whenever necessary.

A Lions Befrienders volunteer, Mrs Irene Leong, a part-time clerical assistant in her 60s, has also been a friend to them.

A typical day starts at 5am for Mad-



A FRIEND: Lions Befriender volunteer Irene Leong helps the couple.

am Choy, when she wakes up to do the household chores. She wakes Mr How at 7am for breakfast.

For lunch, she sometimes prepares rice and steamed fish.

The rest of the day, she occupies herself by doing handicraft, making containers out of wires and colourful beads, which she sells for a few dollars to neighbours.

She then helps Mr How bathe and change.

Every month, she spends about \$100 on utilities, \$73 on rent and conservancy, and the rest on groceries and other necessities.

She usually leaves the flat only when she has to go for medical check-ups, once every six months, accompanied by a volunteer.

Her cancer is now in remission.

Mrs Leong sometimes takes them out for dinner or for events organised by the Lions Befrienders.

Said Madam Choy: "Life is hard, but we still have to go on. And friends like Mrs Leong make the journey a little easier."

\$200,000 from walk

THE Lions Befrienders held its Befriending Walk yesterday morning at Bishan Park to raise funds to help more elderly people like Madam Choy and Mr How.

It helped raise \$200,000 for the charity's outreach programmes. These include activities and home visits for about 1,850 seniors islandwide. About 1,300 people were at the event.

Donors may call the charity at 1800 375-8600 or visit its website at www.lionsbefrienders.org.sg for more information.