

Karung guni man

BURIED AT SEA



Mr Chong Tay Kwong.

Undertaker arranges free funerals for those without relatives to claim them

REPORT: GAN LING KAI
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It was an odd group of people at this funeral. Myself, my colleague Benjamin Soria, a boatman, a monk and an undertaker. What's even odder - none of us knew the dead man.

Mr Chong Tay Kwong was found dead in his one-room rental flat at Block 37 Circuit Road on July 19 - five days after his 60th birthday.

By the time his body was found - only because someone had alerted the police after smelling the stench of death from outside Mr Chong's flat - it had already started decomposing.

"There's no point in keeping their ashes in urns when there's no one to come and pay respects."

- Mr Roland Tay, seen here with a monk carrying out the sea burial for the deceased

The Chinese-born Mr Chong, a karung guni man who has been living in Singapore for the past few decades, had no kin to attend his funeral.

So it was left to the five of us to observe the funeral rites, organised by undertaker Roland Tay, 63, from Direct Singapore Funeral Services.

About two months ago, we set out to sea at 6.30 one morning by launch from Changi Point Ferry Terminal. We headed to a spot a couple of kilometres south of Pulau Semakau.

This is the designated site for sea burials in Singapore.

Mr Tay said he often conducts free funerals for seniors who have died but have no relatives to claim their bodies.

He does this out of goodwill and for good karma, he said. His own family members help out with the funeral rites, and Mr Tay has to pay only for the bumboat ride, which he insists is a small amount.

After the cremation, he usually takes the ashes out to sea.

"There's no point in keeping their ashes in urns

when there's no one to come and pay respects," Mr Tay said.

But traditional rites are not spared. At the sea burial for Chong, Reverend Sek Ru Hong, 53, from Guan Hong Temple meticulously arranged the food offerings and flowers on the deck as first light washed over the bumboat.

The silence of the morning was broken only by Rev Ru Hong chanting his prayers.

After about 10 minutes of prayer, Rev Ru Hong and Mr Tay scattered Mr Chong's ashes in the wind. That was our final farewell to Mr Chong.

Over the past few years, Mr Tay said he has been conducting one such sea burial a month.

"It's usually the neighbours of the deceased who approach me for help," said Mr Tay, as was the case with Mr Chong.

Neighbours such as Madam Cheong Kan Yan, the 55-year-old cleaner told *The New Paper* on Sunday that Mr Chong had probably been dead two days by the time the body was found, based on the last time she saw the man alive.

She cried

Another person who holds Mr Chong in dear memory is Ms Wengly Lan, 41, who works in a grocery store in Geylang.

She was the one who had sent a colleague to check on Mr Chong on July 19.

She did that because she had not seen him for a few days, which was "strange" because Mr Chong would usually collect old cardboard boxes from her every day.

But on smelling a stench outside Mr Chong's flat, that colleague alerted the police.

Ms Lan said Mr Chong was a bachelor. She is one of the few friends that he had.

She added that she would give him food and more than \$100 each month.

Ms Lan said over the phone: "I couldn't stop crying when I heard about his death."

"I remember how he would carry a small cardboard on his bicycle that would become almost too heavy for him to pedal. But for all of that, he

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made less than \$15 a day." Police have classified Mr Chong's death as natural death.

The tragic passing of seniors whose deaths go unreported for days is common.

Media reports in 2009 and 2008 showed that there were at least seven cases of decomposed bodies found days after their death.

At least 45 elderly people died alone in their homes in 2007.

The police will arrest for relatives to come forward when elderly persons die alone at home.

There were at least 18 such appeals to date this year based on the news releases placed on the police website. At least 11 such appeals went out last year, 13 in 2008.

The number would probably more than triple if the deaths of the alone-elderly in community homes and hospitals are also included.

But repeated attempts by the police to trace the next of kin, such as by speaking to the neighbours and acquaintances, often fail.

Sadly, there is no one to come around.

For exclusive videos and photos on Project Helping Hands, visit tp.sg/helpinghands

Help us reach out to them

To help the elderly who are living alone, *The New Paper* has partnered the Lions Befrienders Service Association and Ngwe Ann Polytechnic in Project Helping Hands.

THE PROJECT

DEMO It involves installing wireless motion sensors in the apartments of senior citizens living alone.

The system tracks the resident's movements and sends an SMS to a caregiver or volunteer if it detects unusually long inactivity periods - for example, if the resident stops moving. Only to an injury or illness.

This technology, known as the NP's Elderly Monitoring System, was developed by the staff and students of Ngwe Ann Polytechnic.

Lions Befrienders has identified 1,000 newly elderly Singaporeans living in one-room flats as potential beneficiaries.

MAA-OUT To get the hardware portion of the project up and running, at least \$1 million is needed by the end of the year - \$100k for every home.

Equally important is the manpower. Volunteers are needed to assist seniors living on their own.

Their main responsibility is to receive and act on the SMS alerts that will be automatically sent off if the sensors detect unusually long inactivity periods.

HOW TO DONATE A donation of \$20 will pay for sensors to be installed in one flat. You can donate more if you wish to adopt more than one household.

But any amount is welcome. We hope students in the same class, colleagues in a department or neighbours on the same street or community group will come together to adopt a home.

Please make out your cheque to "Lions Befrienders", and mail it to:

Lions Befrienders Service Association (Singapore)
Blk 194, Block 194V, #01-355, Singapore 150130

Please indicate on the back of the cheque: ■ Project Helping Hands ■ Your full name ■ NRIC ■ Address ■ Contact number

Corporate donors should also indicate their company's name as registered with AIC and their Business Registration Number.

Donations can also be made by cash at the Lions Befrienders' office during office hours (Mon-Fri) in weekdays.

All donations are tax-exempt.

HOW TO VOLUNTEER To sign up as a volunteer, please call 1800-375 8000 or visit www.lionsbefrienders.org.sg

All funds raised for the project will be handled and disbursed by Lions Befrienders.

Neighbours thought stench was from food

REPORT: CHONG SHIN YEN
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The two packets of food were left hanging at her gate for two days.

But neighbours thought that Madam Goh At Gem, 75, had left them there as she did not want them.

It was only when neighbours detected a foul smell coming from her flat that the alarm was raised.

Madam Goh's decomposing body was found in her one-room rental flat on the fifth floor of Block 315, Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1, on Thursday.

It didn't help that Madam Goh, who was single, kept to herself, said her neighbours.

One of them, who wanted to be known only as Susan, told *The New Paper* on Sunday that she thought the smell was coming from the packets of food that had turned rancid.

Ms Susan, 40, a factory worker, said



RANCID: Neighbours thought the smell came from these packets of food, which had been hanging at the dead woman's gate for days. THE PICTURE: SUE WOO

"She [Madam Goh] had told me before that she didn't like the food delivered by the volunteer organisation."

"So I thought that she didn't want them and left them hanging there."

Ms Susan last saw Madam Goh last Saturday.

Another neighbour, who knew Madam Goh's daily routine well, also did not suspect anything amiss when she did not see her for days.

Madam Evelyn Fernandez, 70, who lives two doors away from Madam Goh, said that Madam Goh usually went for breakfast

volunteers at the Lions Befrienders centre at the void deck of her block.

The volunteers called the police. A police spokesman confirmed that they received a call on Thursday at about 1pm. Madam Goh was found dead in the toilet. Police are investigating if an unnatural death.

The quiet, elderly woman appeared healthy to her neighbours and her sudden death was a surprise to them.

Friendly Said Susan: "She was a friendly old woman who always greeted us with a smile."

Could the sad stories of Madam Goh and Mr Chong Tay Kwong have been prevented? After all, according to figures released by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports this year, the number of those aged 60 and above and living on their own is projected to rise from 35,000 last year to 61,000 in 2020.

How can we help?

The *New Paper* has embarked on Project Helping Hands, in partnership with the voluntary welfare organisation Lions Befrienders Service Association and Ngwe Ann Polytechnic. (See report at right.)

Will you lend a hand too?

about 8am. "After that, she would sit at the void deck and wait for her lunch to be delivered at about 11.30am," she said.

By 3pm, Madam Goh would go downstairs again to wait for her dinner.

Madam Fernandez, a retired secretary, said: "I did not see her this week but I thought that she was not feeling well and was resting at home."

No one knocked on Madam Goh's door to check on her and no one visited her.

Madam Fernandez said that she noticed the stench that morning and alerted the