

THE NEW PAPER

Project Helping Hands

http://helpinghands

They can't fix
'scissors man'

His prized possession is ...

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FOR several nights last week, Mr Wong Hong Fook, 88, was living in darkness.

And during that time, he wondered if it was because he had not paid his electricity bill for his one-room flat in Beach Road, causing the supply to be cut.

How was he supposed to move around the room – cluttered with boxes, newspapers and a few pieces of old furniture – at night?

Mr Wong, a bachelor who has been getting by with the few hundred dollars of public assistance he receives monthly, did not know who to turn to.

So he simply left his front door open at night so that the light from the corridor could shine into his home.

But as it turned out, he had not been late in paying his bills.

The electricity got cut off only because the circuit breaker had tripped.

That was discovered by two volunteers from Lions Benefactors Service Association on Tuesday night when they went on their weekly visits to several elderly persons living in Mr Wong's block of flats.

Once the electricity connection problem was identified, a flick of a switch brought light back into Mr Wong's home again that night.

But such is the reality of many aged living alone. One of the volunteers, Mr Anthony Teo, 56, a real estate agent, said: "The simplest of issues can cause these problems for days."

Mr Wong hardly has any visitors other than the Lions Benefactors volunteers.

He told The New Paper on Sunday an Hkkian that he had a few siblings but all have died except for his youngest sister.

Mr Wong, who has dementia, could not even find the contact number of his only family member.

The other volunteers who visit Mr Wong, Miss Lam Yee Ling, 25, a sales executive, said: "We are very worried for him."

"Because he is on his own most of the time, there's no one to look out for him."

Mr Teo also said that a year ago, Mr Wong suffered from giddy spells, possibly due to a heart problem.

He was rushed to the hospital by ambulance only because Mr Teo happened to visit him that night.

Is Mr Wong worried about living alone?

He would only say in Hokkien: "When the time comes, it comes."

He is resigned to his fate, but talk about scissors and his eyes would light up.

More than 40 years ago, he picked up the trade of repairing scissors and sewing machines.

Business used to be brisk, recalled Mr Wong, whose one-room flat has been turned into a scissors repair workshop.

But today, customers who come to him – through friends' recommendations – are few and far between.

Still, repairing scissors is what keeps him occupied – a job he still does for a few bucks.

"The volunteers and my neighbours all know him as the 'scissors man'," said Miss Lim.

Name card

Mr Wong even printed name cards (but the correct address but an invalid mobile phone number), which he proudly gave to this reporter.

He also showed us how he sharpens scissors with a sharpening stone and some water.

The prized item in Mr Wong's home-cum-workshop is an eight-inch pair of scissors, left by a customer five years ago and who has yet to return to collect the blades.

Mr Wong will keep them nice and sharp – just in case the customer returns.

But who will watch over Mr Wong, whose memory gets blunt with each passing day?

That's the concern raised by the volunteers who visit him.

Said Mr Teo: "With his dementia and old age, he can't take care of himself."

Mr Wong is one of the potential beneficiaries of Project Helping Hands, which was launched to help the elderly living alone. (See report on facing page.)

Miss Lim said: "Hopefully with the system fixed in his home, it will act as a safety net."

EDGY PASSION:
Mr Wong Hong Fook with his prized possession – an eight-inch pair of scissors left behind by a customer. He demonstrates how to tell if the blades are straight.

TOP PICTURE
RENAISSANCE DESIGNIt takes just 30
minutes a week to
help lonely elderly

FOR Project Helping Hands to be implemented, generosity and the willingness to volunteer are needed from the public.

One organisation which has gone the extra mile to lend a helping hand is West Spring Secondary School (WSSS).

Two days after Project Helping Hands was launched on Oct 17, the principal of WSSS, Mr Seet Tien-ee, 63, encouraged his staff to contribute.

By Oct 26, more than 30 members of his staff had responded, donating more than S2,100.

Mr Seet told The New Paper on Sunday: "In our profession, we teach students to be responsible citizens by encouraging them to teach the underprivileged in society."

"As educators, we have to lead by example."

"The school may also organise some of its students to participate in the project as volunteers."

Mr Goh Boo Han, 69, the executive director of Lions Benefactors, said: "As Singapore's population ages, we need more people to come forward as volunteers."

Under its programme, half an hour a week is all the time you need to put aside to befriended an elderly person living alone, said Mr Goh.

"That's less than the time you would spend to watch a TV

drama. But this sacrifice will go a long way in helping the elderly," said Mr Goh.

Currently, Lions Benefactors mainly reaches out to those aged 65 and above who are living alone.

It is supported by 1,100 volunteers who visit about 2,200 seniors islandwide weekly.

But Mr Goh believes more can be done.

Lions Benefactors aims to visit 63,000 seniors weekly by 2014. For that to happen, it requires the support of about 4,000 volunteers.

These volunteers will also be roped in to implement Project Helping Hands by responding to any emergency alerts sent out by the monitoring system.

Committed

Mr Goh added: "We need volunteers who can stay committed for at least six months. We cannot be sending a different beneficiary every week to visit the same senior."

"It takes time for the seniors to open up to strangers."

Mr Gerard Ee, 61, chairman of Council for Third Age (CTA), said he is keen to hear about Project Helping Hands.

Mr Ee said: "For Singapore to really step up as a success and a country that is improving in all aspects, it must also consider its development in the social service sector."

He added that neighbourhoods is a key to community bonding.

Mr Ee said: "Many of us want to help people. But we should always start from home."

"Take care of your family first, and if you want to extend yourself, take care of your neighbours."

"This teaming up of the media, of volunteers on the ground and of the thinkers – the students – is the way to go to form a partnership."

— Mr Gerard Ee, chairman of Council for Third Age, on Project Helping Hands

Help us reach out to them

TO help the elderly who are living alone, The New Paper has partnered the Lions Benefactors Service Association and Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Project Helping Hands.

THE PROJECT

DESIGN

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 due to an injury or illness.

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

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

ROLL-OUT

To get the hardware portion of the project up and running, at least S1 million is needed by the end of the year – S1,000 for every home.

Equally important is the hardware. Volunteers are needed to inspect seniors living on their own.

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

HOW TO DONATE

A donation of S1,000 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 employees on the same street or community group will come together to adopt a home.

Please email us your cheque to "Lions Benefactors", and mail it to:

Lions Benefactors Service Association
(Singapore)
Bik 130, Bukit Merah View, #01-358,
Singapore 150130

Please indicate on the back of the cheque

Project Helping Hands

Year full name

NIC

Address

Contact number

Corporate donors should also indicate their company's name (as registered with ACRU) and their business registration number.

Donations can also be made by cash at the Lions Benefactors' office during office hours (9am-5pm) on weekdays.

All donations are tax-exempt.

HOW TO VOLUNTEER

To sign up as a volunteer, please call 1800-375 9600 or visit

www.lionsbenefactors.org.sg

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