

Singapore elder reminds us of the simple joys in life



The author with Madame Loke in her home. Photo by Matt Klauer.

Framed sepia pictures hang on the wall – portraits of her younger self. On the other wall hangs decorations from Chinese New Year: two zodiac ornaments for the Year of the Cow and a bright yellow character meaning “good fortune” is placed in the center. A bed is visible with the front door open. An old-fashioned Chinese table sits in one corner. A two-room house. This is where Madame Loke Swee Heong lives.



Madame Loke's food cabinet at home. Photo by Matthew Klauer

I've had the pleasure to get to know Madame Loke, who is one of the participants of the Hua Mei Elder-centred Programme of Integrated Comprehensive Care here in Singapore.

At 89 years old, she only has two younger brothers left in her family – one of whom she rarely contacts. Having no husband or kids of her own, she lives alone at an HDB flat with a close friend she calls “Ah Gui.”

For the weak and frail elderly at Hua Mei, living alone is a terrifying reality. Though Madame Loke has no family members to take care of her, Hua Mei, the day-care center operated by the Tsao Foundation, provides her a place to visit twice a week, allowing her to stay active and get to know other elderly people around her age. They also provide her with the health care that she needs.



Madame Loke's food cabinet. Photo by Matthew Klauer

I've gained a much better understanding about old age through volunteering there, but visiting Madame Loke at her house provided me with new insight into her life, from little things like the way she has to maneuver around her own house by pushing a small plastic stool. She keeps a handy food cabinet consisting of instant noodles and bottles of water by her bed so she can easily reach for what she needs.

The room had a homey feel to it, as if I was back in my own grandma's house in Hong Kong. We sat side-by-side as she eagerly showed me pictures from her collection of photo albums.



Looking at pictures with Madame Loke. Photo by Matthew Klauer

Right before our interview, she asked me as we conversed in Cantonese, “How do I look? I sewed the beads onto this shirt at Hua Mei.”

She looked lively and youthful to me in her bright pink clothing, even at 89. Although she was glowing in her shirt, she revealed to me a much darker picture of her personal life.

During the interview, she said, “You’re still young, have a future, can walk and work, but I can’t.. I’m physically weak now.”

Twenty years ago, she got hit by a car during a night shift of working at her own shop. She was sent to the hospital unconscious and was forced to give up her job because she could no longer work.

A few years later, after another unfortunate fall to the ground due to imbalance, she had to stay weeks at the hospital to recover from nerve damage. Now, her legs are swollen and she can only get around in a wheelchair. The only way she can get out of the house is to have someone accompany her.

Madame Loke lived through the World War II when Japan invaded Malaysia. She was forced to run away and farm to survive, but she finds that her life now is tougher than the WWII times because she was young and knew nothing else. Now she constantly has body pains, can’t work, and sleeps much of the day.

She has been through a tremendous amount and now realizes that the most important things in life are actually our most basic needs. “Nothing’s important anymore. Just to

be able to eat, sleep and piss.” Though she feels lonely at times, she says, “I live alone, but I feel free... The world changes as you age, but you can still leave your name and memories here after you die.”

When asked about how she stays optimistic about life, she replied with blatant honesty, “I just live every day as it comes.”

She stays hopeful by doing the things that she loves, like drawing and painting at Hua Mei to pass the time. “Drawing makes me happy.”

She has painted over 200 paintings at Hua Mei and is one of their “star artists.” Hua Mei allows her to get out of the house, socialize with the other elderly, and engage in the things that she loves.

Her simple satisfactions are what gets her through, teaching us that we can find happiness and comfort even in the simplest of lifestyles.



Madame Loke shares memories and photos with the author. Photo by Matt Klauer

Volunteering through Hua Mei has given me invaluable working experience and taught me not only career skills but also life lessons. Many of us want to create an impact on this world, but we sometimes forget that it begins with the local community. By simply giving up some of our time, we can touch the lives of those around us.