



Leaders... (from left) Miss Elsa Shalina Abdullah, Miss Druga Rajendran, Miss S. Buvana and Miss S. Nachammai Vidhya.



Bridging the generation gap

We like to talk about Indian politics over the phone. We also talk about... Singapore's history during her time. I did not know a lot about politics before I met her. I think I benefited from her more than she did from me!

— Miss Anees Aaysha (above with Mrs Pillai and other students and seniors receiving their awards)

Students and seniors build bonds and trade knowledge in four-month project

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OVER four months, 20 student volunteers and 15 seniors spent time with each other and traded knowledge.

For instance, the Indian seniors would pass on their experience to the Indian students who, in return, would spend time with them and teach them how to handle modern necessities like the iPhone.

The endeavour, called Project Shaping Our Unique Legacy (SOUL), was initiated last year by four undergraduates at the National University of Singapore (NUS) — Miss S. Nachammai Vidhya, Miss Elsa Shalina Abdullah, Miss S. Buvana and Miss Druga Rajendran.

Said Miss Vidhya, who is studying medicine: “We’ve worked on past projects together and that is how we met each other. We’ve done many projects. To name a few, we’ve done mentorship programmes, fundraisers, cultural programmes and so forth.”

The four women were also motivated by their relationships with their grandparents. Said Miss Elsa, a history student: “Part of what motivated us was that some of us don’t have the ability to communicate with our grandparents or appreciate them as much as we would like to. We considered this a challenge for ourselves and also a way of giving back to the elderly.”

Although the four undergraduates had come up with the idea to pair the young and old in their project, they did not have the resources and manpower to make it a reality.

When they told a mutual friend who volunteers with Radin Mas Indian Activity Executive Committee (IAEC) about their idea, she relayed their plans to the chairman, Mr G. Balachandran. The two parties met and agreed that Radin Mas IAEC would find the seniors to take part in the project and the four undergraduates would look for student volun-



teers from universities, junior colleges and polytechnics.

Through word-of-mouth, friends and Facebook, Project SOUL was able to gather volunteers, who were then interviewed and selected based on a set of criteria including a genuine interest in interacting with seniors, a willingness to learn about and give back to the community and the ability to maintain a four-month commitment to the project.

Said Miss Rajendran, who is a business administration undergraduate: “We held an induction ceremony where the seniors and the youths met for the first time. Following that, the youths went for a half-day training session to understand the needs and concerns of interacting and communicating with the elderly. Each youth had to submit a monthly report to us so we could track their progress and intervene if necessary.”

During the four months, students were expected to meet their seniors at least twice a month and were encouraged to call them or to send them let-

Ice-breaking game... teams of seniors and students stack a pyramid of cans. The fastest team that finishes without dropping the cans wins.

PHOTOS: RADIN MAS IAEC, G. BALACHANDRAN

ters. Once a month, the Project SOUL founders and Radin Mas IAEC would organise a mass outing for all students and seniors. This included walks, kite-flying and games.

On Jan 10, a ceremony was held at Radin Mas Community Centre which marked the culmination of the four-month project. The student volunteers received certificates from the guest-of-honour, chairman of People’s Association Narpani Pearavai K. Ramamoorthy, in recognition of their efforts, while the seniors were given framed photos of the youths they have grown so close to.

One of them, NUS undergraduate Anees Aaysha, 22, who is studying project and facilities management and was paired with 74-year-old Shanta Pillai, said she learnt a lot from her partner.

“We like to talk about Indian politics over the phone. We also talk about daily topics such as family and meals, as well as Singapore’s history during her time. I did not know a lot about politics before I met her. I think I benefited from her more than she did from me!”

In turn, Mrs Pillai, a Malayalee with two married children and five grandchildren, taught Miss Aaysha about willpower and humility. “If you don’t know something, you should learn it. But you have to be humble, that’s what I want her to know. I used to tell her, with willpower you can live, if you don’t know anything, you cannot live,” said Mrs Pillai.

Like many of the other volunteers, Miss Aaysha and Mrs Pillai’s friendship will extend beyond the project. Miss Aaysha has plans to visit Mrs Pillai more in the future, and to learn traditional Kerala cooking from her. “She is my new granddaughter!” said Mrs Pillai.

There are plans for a second run of the project. Said Mr Balachandran: “Though the initiative was hatched by a small group of NUS undergraduates, the benefits from the pilot was quite far-reaching, especially for the seniors.

“The NUS Indian Cultural Society has affirmed the importance of this project and they will be co-organising its second run with Radin Mas CC in 2015. The project is slated to begin in mid-March and plans are underway to make the project bigger and better.”

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