

Don plays Cupid by throwing parties

Young people get a chance to meet and pick up dating tips at his home

Calvin Yang

Dr Ben Leong is interested in teaching young people not just what makes computers tick, but also what makes two people click.

The 43-year-old associate professor, who teaches computer science at the National University of Singapore (NUS), organises parties for his former students to meet new people and shares with them dating and marriage tips.

Dr Leong, who is married with children, held two such parties, including a barbecue, at his condominium earlier this year.

In "Prof Ben's Lonely Hearts Club" – a running joke that he has with his students – participants play icebreaker games, chat over free food, and get dating tips from Dr Leong and other married adults.

About 20 of his past and present students attended each of the parties, which had an even mix of men and women.

"Some of my students have been complaining that they find it hard to meet people after they graduate and start working," said Dr Leong. "I provide the food, so they just eat and play the games. Apparently, some of them went out after that."

The Straits Times understands that a few other lecturers from other universities have also held small gatherings for students to catch up and make new friends.

Statistics show that more Singapore residents in their mid- to late-20s are single. They made up 70 per cent of the people in their age group in 2015, a sharp rise from 50 per cent about 15 years ago, the latest General Household Survey released last year shows.

This is even though the Marriage and Parenthood Survey released by the National Population and Talent Division in July found that 83 per cent of singles aged 21 to 35 years old said they intend to marry.

Young graduates seem to have trouble finding a life partner after leaving university, say sociologists. The top reason cited: having a hard time meeting new people at work.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan said: "Given how much time we spend at the office, unless you can find a potential partner within the same office, most will be hard pressed for time to expand their networks and get to know new friends."

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser reckons young graduates are expected to work longer hours to demonstrate commitment during the early part of their careers.

"They do not have as much disposable time and opportunities for pairing as compared to their undergraduate days," he said. "Staying on campus or being active in co-curricular activities provide ample opportunities for social mixing and eventually pairing."

Dr Leong does not think he is going out of his way to help his charges find love. "I am quite close to my students and this is one way for them to come back and hang out with me," he said.

While many who attended his parties had taken his classes before, some of the young women who showed up were his students' friends. Some are still in university, others have graduated. Their ages range from 22 to 33.

His students are mostly male, he said, so he opens the parties to female friends of his students.

For the parties, Dr Leong would even invite "decoys", or people who are attached, so that it would be less awkward. Noting that the first two gatherings were "not bad", he hopes to organise another one soon.

Most students at his parties said they have trouble meeting new people after leaving university. Many admitted that they are looking for a life partner.

A computer science graduate, 33, who went for the party last month, said it was tough finding love when he began working, as "you usually only meet the people in your company".

Another student at the same party added: "I initially went with the intention of meeting new people, but it became obvious that the bigger takeaway was learning to interact with the other gender, and that it isn't as daunting as one thinks."

The 29-year-old believes the party is a "good precursor" for those who have never dated before. "I

appreciated how it was structured with learning points from the coaches who are happily married."

Observers lauded the idea of holding gatherings for young graduates to meet new people and find love.

Sociologist Kang Soon-Hock of

the Singapore University of Social Sciences said such initiatives widen social networks. "This may also increase the chances of them meeting their life partners in the process."

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LIANHE ZHAOBAO FILE PHOTO

HELPING THE YOUNG TO FIND LOVE

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DR BEN LEONG, an associate professor who teaches computer science at NUS.