

Causes

CAMP COMPASSION

In fast-paced Singapore, there are those in need – and those who go out of their way to meet those needs. This is part of a series on noteworthy causes *The Straits Times* is spotlighting.



Norman Syaagir, 11, playing a game where he navigated an obstacle course and avoided touching the chairs and the red raffia string. The event was Camp Simba, a camp for children whose families are affected by cancer. During the camp, the premises of Duke-NUS Medical School was transformed into a carnival with games for the children. PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Ilyda Chua

When her mother was diagnosed with gastric cancer in 2014, Eve Ng, then nine years old, was struck with a sense of hopelessness.

To cheer her up, her parents sent her and her three younger siblings to Camp Simba, a student-led initiative which aims to provide emotional support and a sense of community to children with family members affected by cancer.

This year, inspired by her first experience as a camper, Eve decided to return to Camp Simba – but this time, as a mentor.

Now a Secondary One student, she is one of the 14 teenagers who have joined the camp's new mentorship programme. The initiative will see older campers stepping up to mentor their juniors and follows Camp Simba's merger with Camp Rafiki, a sister camp targeting teenagers organised by the Singapore Cancer Society.

With the new mentorship programme, Camp Simba hopes to empower its older campers while inspiring its younger participants, said co-director Gabriel Figueroa, 23. "Teaching is a form of empowering. If you give people the chance to teach something, rather than just being on the receiving end of information, they'll really feel more confident about themselves and their experiences," said Mr Figueroa, a medical student at Duke-NUS.

"We believe that it'll be really powerful for our younger participants to see someone who's been through the same thing they have been, who's just a couple years older, and who's happy and doing great."

The camp has also introduced a new alumni network, Simba Siblings, for campers who have reached the age limit of 16. Alumni will be able to return to Camp Simba as volunteers, to help plan future camps.

While she enjoys mentoring the younger children, Eve said that she also hopes to return to Camp Simba as a facilitator when she "graduates" as a camper. After battling cancer for years, her mother is now in the recovery stages of cancer, and has just had another daughter.

"As a camper, I shared my stories and struggles with my facilitators," said Eve. "I want to come back as a facilitator so that I can help children who have gone through the

same things as me, who have family members dealing with cancer and don't really know how to cope."

The camp is run and facilitated entirely by student volunteers from Duke-NUS Medical School and NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. They are trained in topics such as small group facilitation as well as emotional first aid and child and adolescent psychology.

First-year medical student Sun Joon Hwang, 24, shared an experience that inspired him to join the camp as a volunteer. "My mum was diagnosed with colon cancer when I was in seventh grade," he said. "As a child, I didn't have the emotional maturity to process everything I was feeling."

However, having an older brother who supported him as he struggled to come to terms with his mother's cancer helped tremendously, he said. "Having role models, big brothers and sisters to help and support you, and to cheer you up – that's really important. I want to be able to support the children in any way that they need." His mother is now doing well after undergoing chemotherapy, he added.

The new initiatives aim to ensure the camp's long-term sustainability. Founded in 2008, the camp was established at the suggestion of a first-year medical student, Ms Sally Ong. After having witnessed the devastating effects of cancer on children, she proposed the idea of a camp to Ms Bianca Chan, then head of the community service committee at Duke-NUS.

Ms Chan had just visited the home of a cancer patient as part of her palliative care course, and saw how the patient's five young children were cooped up at home, while the rest of the family was preoccupied with taking care of their sick mother. "As mere medical students, there was not much we could do to help the patient with cancer, but I saw how we could make a difference in the lives of her children," said Ms Chan, now 34 and a senior resident in paediatrics at KK Hospital. "Through this camp, I hoped to give these children a chance to be a child again, and to give them some respite from the sadness they face at home."

And the camp has certainly made a difference to its participants. Veteran camper Benjamin Leong, 12, has been going to Camp Simba since he was six years old, when his



Aaron Tan, 10, playing a booth game where he tried to hit some targets by sliding a plastic bottle cap, at Camp Simba on the premises of Duke-NUS Medical School. PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

CAUSES

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father was diagnosed with lung cancer. "At the time, I couldn't comprehend it at all, so I didn't know how to feel, what to feel," said Benjamin, now a Primary Six student. "The camp didn't help my father make it through the chemotherapy. But it helped me." Benjamin hopes to be able to return as a volunteer when he is older.

While the camp is a student-led initiative, it receives support from external sponsors as well as the schools, with faculty members donating money to financially support the project. As a result of the funding it receives, it is free for the children. But despite the support it receives, the camp is not without its challenges, said Mr Figueroa. "We're all medical students. And medical school is crazy – it's like a 24/7 commitment... But we really believe in the power that this initiative has."

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Among the campers were Benjamin Leong (right), 12 and Boon Kye Teck, 11, with Ms Chang Huan Yin, 25, a facilitator for the camp. PHOTO: LLYDA CHUA

EMPOWERING OTHERS

Teaching is a form of empowering. If you give people the chance to teach something, rather than just being on the receiving end of information, they'll really feel more confident about themselves and their experiences. And at the same time, we believe that it'll be really powerful for our younger participants to see someone who's been through the same thing they have been, who's just a couple years older, and who's happy and doing great.



MR GABRIEL FIGUEROA, on how giving people the chance to teach is a form of empowering.

SHARING EXPERIENCES

As a camper, I shared my stories and struggles with my facilitator. I want to come back as a facilitator so that I can help children who have gone through the same things as me, who have family members dealing with cancer and don't really know how to cope.



MSEVE NG, on wanting to come back as a facilitator to share her stories.

HAVING ROLE MODELS

My mum was diagnosed with colon cancer when I was in seventh grade. As a child, I didn't have the emotional maturity to process everything I was feeling. Having role models, big brothers and sisters to help and support you, and to cheer you up – that's really important. I want to be able to support the children in any way that they need.



MR SUN JOON HWANG, first-year medical student, on the importance of having role models to help.

GIVING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

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VETERAN CAMPER BENJAMIN LEONG, now 12, on feeling lost six years earlier when his father was diagnosed with lung cancer.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

As mere medical students, there was not much we could do to help the patient with cancer, but I saw how we could make a difference in the lives of her children. Through this camp, I hoped to give these children a chance to be a child again, and to give them some respite from the sadness they face at home.



MS BIANCA CHAN, senior resident in paediatrics, on making a difference in the lives of a patient's children.