

A Chance to Show Appreciation **for the Caregivers**



Caregivers and staff participated in The River of Life activity together



The River of Life, by one of the caregiver groups

Have you noticed that we give a lot of attention to the needs of the children in orphanages, the elderly residents in old folks homes and the patients in hospices? They are no doubt the target beneficiaries of most organisations and individuals who give generously to charities. But have we forgotten the caregivers?

Having served in the caring ministry for the past seven years, I have befriended many caregivers who serve in rehabilitation centres, welfare homes, hospitals and hospices. As much as they were driven by their continuous passion in what they do, most caregivers were experiencing fatigue, isolation, stress and financial burdens. They spent most of their time attending to the needs of the clients—ensuring their overall physical, social, mental, emotional and sometimes spiritual well-being. Seasoned caregivers know well that in such a ministry, the services and care could go beyond official working hours. Those who serve in residential homes will need to deal with the clients 24/7. Besides being a caregiver, most of them play multiple roles—as a lay

counsellor, a teacher, a mentor, a financial planner, a social worker, a father/mother, a sister/brother, a cook, a driver, a friend. Many are lacking support for their own needs and struggles.

In light of this, Malaysian Care organised a Caregivers' Retreat in Melaka in July for a group of 26 caregivers who serve people living with HIV (PLHIV). The purpose of the retreat was to provide relief and relaxation for caregivers who serve tirelessly in the field and to kickstart a support network for caregivers for better sustenance in this field. The caregivers comprised volunteers and social workers who serve in welfare homes, hospices, hospitals and NGOs. The group was a good mixture of multiracial youth and seniors, men and women. It was not easy to get these caregivers off their busy work schedules to come away for a short vacation. Three caregivers had to pull out at the last minute due to urgent matters. Yet those who made it had a refreshing vacation. Melaka seemed to be the perfect location with its famous food, historical sights, river esplanade and its night market. We checked into a beautifully restored Peranakan hotel, which was a stone's



Have we forgotten the caregivers?

throw from the famous Jonker Walk. Everyone was so excited and happy, away from their hectic daily work.

The retreat was organised in a way that, apart from a daily gathering session, caregivers could have ample free time for themselves—whether they preferred to rest in the hotel or venture out. On the first day, we had fun through the ice-breaker games. It was a pleasant experience to watch the humorous side of the senior adults, in particular. On the second day, we had a feedback session as an avenue for the caregivers to express their personal experience, needs and struggles. This was done through a drawing exercise entitled “The River of Life”. Caregivers drew various objects along and around the river. Then, they explained their drawings and each indicated their current state of life in the drawing. On the final day, we had an open sharing session where each caregiver was given the opportunity to speak. Listening to each of them somehow reconfirmed the fact that support and encouragement for the caregivers is indeed lacking.

“It’s been 10 years since I last came out like this to be on

a holiday and to do shopping for myself,” said P, who runs a welfare home that receives clients with multiple issues including PLHIV.

“I had to appear strong and well outwardly to my clients. But honestly, I’ve been running empty deep inside and I feel very lonely,” said A, who provides peer support services in the hospitals.

“Last night over dinner, I really enjoyed the good fellowship as we laughed and shared stories with one another. It’s been a long time since I last had a fun time like this,” expressed D, who serves in a residential home.

“I was feeling demotivated and close to giving up. But getting to know one another during this retreat has refreshed me and given me hope to press on,” said L, who journeys with PLHIV.

Caregivers are a rare breed and their well-being needs to be given due attention. This, I believe, will improve their services rendered and sustain them further in this field. ■

■ Frederick Foo serves and journeys alongside people living with HIV, people recovering from substance abuse and juveniles from the prison.