

PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION

# CARING FROM THE GROUND UP

*The People's Association (PA) in Singapore aims to Build and to Bridge Communities in achieving One People, One Singapore. One PA Youth Leaders Scholar tells us more about how she contributes to this noble mission.*

By Gerald Goh

Since its establishment in 1960, the PA has strived to promote social cohesion and racial harmony via its network of grassroots organisations and Community Development Councils. The PA's umbrella also includes the National Youth Council, National Community Leadership Institute and Outward Bound Singapore.

21-year-old Grace Chan, a PA Youth Leaders Scholar who's currently pursuing a Bachelor in Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the UK, will be part of this extensive network in future. She aims to build better communication channels with residents from all walks of life and to forge a stronger bond between the government and its people, thereby paving the way for the shaping of community schemes for the betterment of all Singaporeans.

## WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO TAKE UP THE PA YOUTH LEADERS SCHOLARSHIP?

**Grace Chan En Ying:** I volunteered with the Youth Executive Committee (YEC) in Mountbatten Community Club for close to five years, which allowed me to understand the PA vision from a grassroots volunteer's perspective. During that time, I saw how the grassroots volunteers and staff forge a very solid and trusting relationship with the residents, which is very remarkable.

The constant contact I had with residents

inspired me to take up the PA Youth Leaders Scholarship. I've come to realise my passion to serve and work with people on the ground to make a meaningful difference. This gives me a great sense of purpose because I've seen how much my job means to the people I interact with.

## WHAT MEMORABLE ACTIVITIES HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED IN AT THE PA YOUTH MOVEMENT?

**Grace:** The activities I was involved in at the PA Youth Movement (PAYM) include both at the constituency level and national level.

Constituency level activities are more long-term, such as the loveCARE Initiative where we engaged elderly residents from a specific background in mentally-stimulating activities through monthly house visits. I was also involved in the mentoring of youths in Youth-led projects such as Service Learning Clubs (SLCs) in neighbouring schools and the kick-start of Youth-led interest groups in Mountbatten. The PAYM has been very supportive – the first time we initiated an SLC with a neighbouring school, the PAYM sent a staff member from the PA HQ to assist us when we met our partnering school.

At the national level, the PA activities I was involved in include the annual Chingay Parade, National Day Parade, and PAYM's exchange programmes in Shanghai and Cambodia. I was involved with three Chingay Parades and they

were all very memorable experiences – after all, you have youths from all walks of life coming together to execute a national parade, and our friendships have endured even after the weekly trainings and yearly shows!

All in all, I'm glad we have so many platforms in Singapore where everyone can contribute, regardless of your background. The PAYM exchange programmes gave me the opportunity to experience the overseas community sectors. Not only did we share our practices from Singapore, we also learned from them.

**SHARE SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY WITH US.**

**Grace:** I went to Shanghai in 2012 for a PAYM trip and grew interested in the social and community issues that China currently faces. I decided to pursue my new interest by taking up a more advanced Mandarin course to study the social issues of China at the London School of Economics (LSE) and went to Shanghai again for the LSE-Fudan Mandarin exchange programme last year.

While in Shanghai, we were exposed to social science lectures in Mandarin and were expected to do a research project in Mandarin.

groups start off with only a handful of people but eventually grow to include a very diverse group of Singaporeans.

For instance, we had a dance interest group in Mountbatten which started off with just one genre of dance. But with the members taking turns to teach the others a different genre during the sessions, all of us eventually benefited from one another's talents. I also made friends with people not just from my social background, but with people I would normally not have had the opportunity to do so.

The PA also believes in the power of resident involvement. Grassroots volunteers can only do so much, and our actual goal is to work towards having more residents being involved in their neighbourhood on a voluntary basis. I believe we are moving towards more in-depth interaction, where activities organised by the grassroots leaders do not just attract the participation of individuals. Instead, the activities are aimed at encouraging people to be rooted in their community by taking up leadership roles to serve their neighbours. ■

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The experience of living in Shanghai for two months was very valuable and allowed me to experience community-style living while witnessing the differences in the community settings between Shanghai and Singapore. The experience has certainly influenced the way I will work with community programmes at the PA going forward.

I was also involved in a student-led society during my three years as an undergraduate in the UK, where I had the opportunity to reach out to other students and to lead effective discussion groups in a very international context. I learnt how to reach out to international students and relate to different cultures and eventually developed sufficient skill to lead projects with students of diverse working cultures in completing our projects.

**THE PA'S MISSION IS TO PROMOTE RACIAL HARMONY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN SINGAPORE. HOW HAS THE PA MADE THIS POSSIBLE?**

**Grace:** At the constituency level, PA has been encouraging grassroots-led interest groups where residents with common interests can come together, regardless of background or level of expertise. I have seen how interest



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