



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

A ray of hope for the disabled

JESSIE Ong Chia Kee was 37 years old and seven months' pregnant when she had a stroke which left her physically impaired. She could no longer work as an electronic production operator as she needed to check computer hard disks among other things.

Today, more than two years later, she has regained most of her mobility and some of the nearly 20kg she lost after the stroke.

Ms Ong is taking a course in draughtsmanship run by the charity, Abilities Beyond Limitations and Expectations (ABLE). She says she is still young and hopes the training will help her land a full-time job with an architectural firm, so she can contribute to her household. She is married to a technician, and their son is now two years old.

Most of the beneficiaries at ABLE, a member organisation of Caritas Singapore, are people like Ms Ong, who have become physically challenged as a result of an accident or illness.

"Some think there will be no life after their disability, that they will have to stay at home. They feel bad for themselves and for their family, that they are dragging other people down. To be able to come back and be a meaningful contributor to society is very rewarding. We want to see more of this," said ABLE's founding chairman Raymundo Yu. "We want to give them more self-respect. We want to rehabilitate them, retrain them and reintroduce them into the workforce."

This "beginning-to-end solution" - from rehabilitation to introducing job-seekers to employers, and follow-up checks with ABLE clients who have accepted jobs - is a concept Mr Yu came up with after 30 years of experience in volunteer work.

Originally from the Philippines and now a Singapore citizen, he used to be a volunteer at a Manila orphanage run by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, where the children were trained to be tailors, barbers and bakers. He also helped the Little Sisters of the Poor in serving senior citizens and helping with their rehabilitation.

ABLE currently has about 172 clients or beneficiaries, and has placed 60 individuals in jobs this year, said Mr Gene Lee, its executive director. The clients are aged between 18 and 62.

Besides rehabilitation and training in a range of courses including draughtsmanship, domestic skills and office administration, ABLE also provides counselling and transport jointly with the Handicaps Welfare Association (HWA). The two organisations agreed in November 2010 to establish the Centre for the Physically Challenged at HWA's Whampoa premises.

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Mr Jun Arjuna Junit, 28, could not walk for a year-and-a-half after an accident, but now gets around with the aid of a walking frame. "AJ" as he is known, has to take taxis, heavily subsidised by ABLE, from his home in Pasir Ris to classes at the Whampoa centre.

He said that since becoming disabled, he has learnt to take things one day at a time. "I don't think much about the future, whereas before, I would think about buying a house, or buying a car," he said. One thing he does think about is how to get a job in architectural design.

Mr Yu, who is chairman of Threadneedle Investments, used to be chairman of Merrill Lynch, Asia Pacific. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his approach in his work with ABLE seems to be one of corporate efficiency: ABLE, which has been in operation for about two years, has been able to draw on the expertise and physiotherapy and transportation equipment available at HWA, which has been on the charity scene for about 46 years.

Mr Yu gives a lot of credit to his "active and fresh" board and staff. He says he has also been able to leverage on working with partners he knows, including reputable names in local industry such as BreadTalk and the top-end Iggy's restaurant.

His son, Russell, is a partner at Iggy's, where ABLE will hold a \$3,800-per-head fundraising dinner cum wine auction on Sept 26, with the meal prepared by top chefs from Modena in Italy, and Kyoto in Japan. This event follows a similar dinner at Iggy's last year.

ABLE, which serves people of all faiths, has more in store. In the pipeline are plans for social enterprises, for example, by starting off with offering book-keeping services for fellow member organisations of Caritas Singapore, as well as a proposed Respite Centre for people with Muscular Dystrophy and their care-givers, who also need rest from their care-giving responsibilities.

It is also gathering information to set up a resource centre to help people who become physically challenged, or whose relatives are in this situation, said Mr Yu. It can be traumatising to see elderly family members struggle with disability, and people have to learn whether to install rails in bathrooms or bars to help them move around the house, he said.

The general perception of physically challenged persons has to change in society, amid considerations of whether workplaces are properly set up with them in mind, said Mr Yu. Those who are physically challenged should feel they are part of society, rather than on its fringes, he added.

How You Can Help ABLE

How can I make a donation?

Cheque donations should be made payable to 'ABLE Limited'.
(Tax-deductible receipt are given for donations of \$50 and above)

How can I volunteer?

Volunteers can lend their talents and professional skills in the areas of physiotherapy, event coordination, graphic and web design and fundraising.
If you would like to be a volunteer, please email enquiries@able-sg.org