

Bringing end-of-life matters closer to the community

Community engagement projects such as *Both Sides, Now* have enabled conversations with the elderly about end-of-life care to take place through immersive experiences.

“I have always been inspired by my late aunt who planned for a good death,” shares Ms Jee Yin Ling, on what moved her to volunteer for *Both Sides, Now* (BSN), an initiative that aims to build end-of-life-friendly communities using arts-based strategies.

The first knew of BSN at Toa Payoh in 2014, when residents were invited to participate in activities, performances, and conversations centred on topics of living and dying at an open space outside the Toa Payoh Public Library. “Talking about death became less daunting and the residents began to share their stories and views on end-of-life (EOL) matters. This is so empowering. So when BSN called for volunteers, I signed up with them.”

In 2016, BSN brought “The Wind Came Home”, a puppetry performance, and “The Last Dance”, a participatory performance with small group conversations, to Senior Activity Centres. It was Yin Ling’s first outing as a volunteer, where she facilitated conversations on EOL matters with the participants.

CREATING A SAFE SPACE

Yin Ling recounts a time when she facilitated a conversation at a Senior Activity Centre for a group of six seniors. The five female participants were quick to share their experiences and thoughts on EOL matters, while the elderly man listened quietly. When prompted to share his thoughts, he declined, smiled and continued listening.

However, towards the end of the session, the elderly man began to ask questions on Advance Care Planning (ACP). As a volunteer facilitator, she learnt that it was crucial to provide participants space to digest and reflect on the topic, instead of rushing them into action. When people feel that it is a safe space for them to share their thoughts, they will eventually open up.

A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO EOL CONVERSATIONS

BSN volunteers like Yin Ling are part of a community-based approach to shifting mindsets towards EOL matters, and in encouraging people to make plans and have conversations with their loved ones. It is co-presented by Lien Foundation, Ang Chin Moh Foundation, Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative,

in collaboration with community partners such as Yishun Health (Wellness Kampung) and Montfort Care Goodlife.

In 2017, BSN kicked off its iteration in Chong Pang and Telok Blangah, adopting an innovative approach that saw the volunteer team establish a multi-year presence in both communities, and engaging residents through performances, workshops and art projects.

“Volunteers are the cornerstone of the project,” said Programme Manager of ArtsWok Collaborative, Ms Angie Cheong. “It is through their empathetic presence and deep listening skills that a safe space is created for the audience to engage and participate in conversations.” She also shares that interested volunteers undergo a training session to prepare

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Clockwise from this photo: Both Sides, Now Project Team and volunteers in Chong Pang; Public Arts Installation @ Chong Pang; A Both Sides, Now Volunteer at work in Telok Blangah; creating conversation through the arts



them for the work ahead. This includes reflections on their own experiences and views on death and dying, how to build rapport with participants, how to use arts and creative activities to engage in conversations, and role playing in different scenarios. Volunteers are also trained to introduce ACP, where appropriate.

Dr Wong Sweet Fun, Deputy Chairman, Medical Board (Population Health), Yishun Health and Clinical Director, Population Health & Community Transformation, remarks that the

conversations arising from this approach are invaluable to the management of population health in the North. Dr Wong, who is also the Chief Transformation Officer at Yishun Health, says, “Arts and health are non-traditional partners and we are very grateful that this unusual partnership with BSN in the past few years has allowed us to see EOL matters through another lens and guided us to use different media to help residents in the community explore and voice their views on living well to the end.”

LOOKING AHEAD TO TELOK BLANGAH

Following the success of its work in Chong Pang, volunteers like Yin Ling will soon be deployed in Telok Blangah to help with BSN. This includes supporting arts workshops with residents facilitated by artists, being a docent for tours of the public arts installation by the residents, as well as facilitating participatory arts activities during a carnival reaching out to both young and old. The public arts engagement takes place at Telok Blangah from 26 June to 7 July 2019. 📞

For more information on BSN, go to www.bothsidesnow.sg