

Strength in face of death

Sarah Roxanne Sim

Singapore film-makers Jean Loo (below left), 28, and Yang Huiwen (below right), 29, saw a person die before their eyes for the first time when they were shooting *After Cicely*, a 20-minute documentary on palliative care.

As they stood beside the 31-year-old Taiwanese leukaemia patient breathing his last, they fought to hold back their tears. “We were trying to compose ourselves,” says Loo. “We felt that we were there to do our job and we didn’t want to add to the situation.”

While there is a place for professionalism, there is also a place for someone to show his emotions and empathy, as Sister Geraldine Tan discovered.

Now the administrator of St Joseph’s Home & Hospice in Singapore and one of the women featured in *After Cicely*, the Catholic nun chose to go into palliative care chiefly because she wanted to be able to show her empathy for patients openly.

In the film, she recounts an incident that inspired her to dedicate her life to palliative care. “When I entered nursing, a family had just lost someone in the ward. I was crying with them and one of the ones in charge at the hospital said, ‘You are a nurse, you should not be crying. Go and wash your face.’”

“It kind of threw me off and I said if I really want nursing, I want nursing that I can empathise and I wanted palliative

care because of that. That I can really listen with the heart, listen with my mind, with my emotions and yet be supportive to the family.”

Sister Geraldine, 58, is one of five women featured in *After Cicely*, which takes its name from Dame Cicely Saunders, commonly referred to as the founder of the modern hospice movement in the 1960s.

The film, commissioned by the non-profit Lien Foundation as part of its Life Before Death initiative, which aims to empower people living the last days of their lives, documents the work of Sister Geraldine as well as that of Dr Odontuya Davaasuren in Mongolia, Dr Thuy Bui Thi Bich in Vietnam, Mrs Salma Choudhury in Bangladesh and Professor Chantal Chao Co-shi in Taiwan.

It is available for public viewing online at the *After Cicely* official website, www.aftercicely.com.

Lien Foundation is an organisation founded by the late Dr Lien Ying Chow in 1980 to empower people, particularly in areas such as education, eldercare and environmental sustainability.

Loo and Yang worked with Dr Cynthia Goh, adviser to the foundation and director of Lien Centre for Palliative Care, to get in touch with the women featured.

Sister Geraldine, who declined to be interviewed by *Life!*, is described by Loo as a “rather private person”.

Palliative care documentary After Cicely features five women in the field, including Sister Geraldine Tan (right).



PHOTOS: JEAN QINGWEN LOO AND LIEN FOUNDATION

She chooses to draw attention to her work and the benefits of palliative care. She had worked with the foundation for the Happy Coffins project as part of the Life Before Death campaign in 2010 and was again supportive of the foundation’s cause this time around.

The Happy Coffins project aimed to destigmatise death.

Loo says: “We had a very long conversation with her and the foundation. After she spoke to us, she was up for it. The subject matter was a cause that she felt for.”

She and Yang, both full-time film-makers, say that it is the humanity that these women display, as well as their strength and tenacity throughout it all, that inspired them to take on the project, which took six months to film and edit.

Loo says: “Death is an intimate subject that you cannot force down people’s throats. We thought that showing the stories of these women would help to bring across the idea of palliative care in a manner that people can relate to.”

“For me, what stood out was how the people working in palliative care were so

cheerful and positive. They brought so much life to the end process and it was quite symbolic in that sense. They showed a lot of strength in character, which is inspiring.”

Yang, who was previously based in Shanghai as a journalist with Bloomberg News, hopes that the audience will be similarly inspired. “I hope the film and stories featured remind people to live better every day.”

To view *After Cicely*, go to www.aftercicely.com.