

COMMUNITY

In fast-paced Singapore, there are those in need – and those who take up the cudgels on their behalf. This is the latest in a series on noteworthy causes that The Straits Times will be spotlighting.



Volunteers and children from the Shining Star programme in Boon Lay. Under the programme, children from rental blocks and lower-income families are taught language skills. It is run by non-profit organisation Bringing Love to Every Single Soul and is at four locations – Boon Lay, Telok Blangah and two places in Clementi. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Causes

A chance to shine

Shining Star programme helps kids from low-income families to boost their confidence in English

Abigail Ng

A magic wand can make anything happen. But what would children use the wand for?

"Kick my brother off the bed," one boy suggests.

A shy girl raises her hand, but when called upon, promptly decides she has nothing to say. Other magical items suggested were a mirror that could "multiply" the user and a special potion to turn one invisible.

The children were contributing to the storyline of a speech-and-drama project that they are working on in a void deck in Boon Lay.

The magical items are meant to help solve problems the character may face in the story.

After eight sessions, they will bring the characters to life and perform for their families.

It is part of a programme called Bringing Learning to Every Single Soul (Bless) (Shining Star) that hopes to improve the children's confidence in using the English language.

The programme, run by a non-profit organisation called Bringing Love to Every Single Soul (Bless), is at four locations – Boon Lay, Telok Blangah and two places in Clementi.

It aims to reach out to children who live in rental blocks or are from lower-income families.

The programme, which began in

Clementi Avenue 2 in 2014, has been well received by parents and children in the Boon Lay community group.

Administrative assistant Sandy Dee, 29, said her two children look forward to the fortnightly Shining Star sessions. "We were lucky to have heard about this. I really don't have the luxury of taking them for enrichment classes," she said.

Housewife Norizan Jumat, 33, has seen improvement in her son Matin's reading skills and language ability. "If he stays home, he just plays games on the mobile phone. It is better for him to go for the programme," she said.

When asked what he likes about Shining Star, five-year-old Matin Abdul Kasheed said: "I can learn here; I like even the homework."

Shining Star programme community group (CG) manager for Boon Lay, Ms Peh Li Ping, 24, said: "The children are full of imagination. It is encouraging to see them make enormous improvement in their ability to express themselves."

The National University of Singapore social work undergrad teaches a class of more than 10 children aged seven to nine in Boon Lay and has been volunteering there since the group began in April 2015. There is also a class for four- to six-year olds.

Before the programme was launched, she visited residents in rental blocks with other volunteers to inform them of the programme.

The ground-up initiative began purely as a reading programme, with volunteers reading books to the children. Following feedback from the children's parents, they made

changes such as introducing phonetics lessons in the younger class.

Bless founder Francesca Wah, 25, said that it tries to select a block in an area that has many children in the target group and is farther away from family service centres.

This prevents an overlap with activities by the centres. It also makes it more convenient for participants due to its proximity.

Ms Wah, a primary school teacher, said: "Every helping hand from each member of the community, regardless of age, counts in making that little but crucial difference in the life of a child."

Around 120 children attend the programme across the four CGs. Bless will also be starting three new groups this year. Following a partnership with Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) last year, Bless will work with students from Hua Yi Secondary School in a new CG in Jurong.

Mr Edward Lee, 19, one of the ACS(I) students who has since graduated from the school, said he continues to volunteer in Telok Blangah because of the relationships he has with the children.

He said: "The environment they are in is not easy for them and I hope to be able to leave a positive impact on them in one way or another."

As for Ms Peh and the children in Boon Lay, the journey ahead looks to be a magical one.

"I can see that they are anxious but excited about the speech-and-drama project," she said. "The interest that they show is empowering to us as volunteers."

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ACOMMUNITY EFFORT

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BLESS FOUNDER FRANCESCA WAH

JOY IN LEARNING

I can learn here; I like even the homework.



MATIN ABDUL KASHEED, five, when asked what he likes about Shining Star.

Bringing the love

Bringing Love to Every Single Soul (Bless) was launched in 2014 by National University of Singapore students and alumni under the guidance of their professors.

Founder Francesca Wah, 25, saw the power of a community's resources in 2014 when she tried to raise funds for Children's Day presents. She wanted to bring joy to 120 children, but in just two days, friends pooled enough money to buy more than 300 gifts.

This made her realise that there were more than enough resources out there to help people from low-income families.

She decided to start Bless, a non-profit organisation.

The volunteer-run group has two other programmes aimed at mobilising community resources to benefit the larger community:

- Bringing Love to Every Small Soul gifts children from low-income families with essentials and birthday cakes; and
- Bringing Love to Every Single Stranger teaches primary school pupils through a values-in-practice programme.

Bless works with voluntary welfare organisations and family service centres to identify neighbourhoods that would benefit from the Bringing Learning to Every Single Soul programme.

In 2015, they partnered with South West CDC to scale up the efforts under the Adopt-a-Rental Block scheme.

The scheme addresses three core needs of vulnerable, elderly and needy families: social wellness, healthcare, and home safety and improvement.

Abigail Ng