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Volunteers of Bless (Bringing Love to Every Single Soul) reading books to and discussing stories with children from low-income families in the void decks near their homes.

Bringing reading sessions home for kids

Olivia Ho

When Ms Francesca Wah, 23, saw that kids living in rental blocks had trouble attending reading programmes held far from their homes, she decided to bring the reading to their doorstep instead.

Ms Wah, who graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) in psychology and social work in July, came from a low-income family herself.

She remembered being unable to attend reading programmes in her childhood, as it cost too much to take the bus there and her parents were too busy to take her.

With this in mind, Ms Wah and a group of NUS volunteers started Bringing Love to Every Single Soul (Bless) in May this year. It holds fortnightly reading sessions for 25 to 48 children in the void decks of rental blocks in Clementi and Telok Blangah.

Volunteers read children's books to a crowd of children aged four to nine. The children then read out loud back to them, and discuss the story in sessions usually lasting one hour.

"Storybooks are amazing," said Ms

Wah, herself an avid reader. "Through the animal characters in these books, we introduce teaching points and role models for the kids to aspire to. And when these children grow up, they can read to their children. It goes on."

When the volunteers first went knocking on doors in the rental blocks, they were initially shocked at what they saw.

"There would be around six to eight kids in one flat, everyone sleeping in one room," recalled Ms Wah. "Some of the kids weren't wearing clothes, because they just don't have them."

Communication was hard at first. Many residents could not speak English, and spoke mostly Malay and dialects, which few of the volunteers were fluent in.

Ms Wah had to conduct entire conversations through Google Translate.

What impressed her was the neighbourly spirit among the residents. Not only did they welcome the Bless team, they were also keen to lend a hand.

One of the 10 resident volunteers in Telok Blangah, housewife Mumtaz Begum, 46, a single mother of four, said: "I

like to help people. My English is not very good, but I can prepare the kids, ask them to keep quiet and sit properly."

"The kids have improved a lot. I see them learn (and) they are very happy."

Muhammad Zulfadil, eight, said of the programme: "I can learn new things and make new friends."

There are eight resident volunteers at Clementi and 10 at Telok Blangah, and about 45 main student volunteers for Bless, though the number can vary.

Bless plans to start similar programmes next year in six other rental block communities, including Jurong East, Bukit Batok and Dover. It is also developing workbooks based on the stories read to the kids.

It is seeking sponsors so they can print the workbooks and buy about 24 storybooks for each child. Ms Wah estimates that maintaining these resources will cost \$320 per child annually.

"Ultimately what we need to build on is the ability of communities to care for themselves," she said.

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For more information on Bless and its programmes, visit www.bringinglovetoeverysinglesoul.com