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All ears: Apart from phone calls and face-to-face contact, Befrienders also offer counselling services via e-mail. Volunteer Leow Yew Chong says being a Befriender is all about listening without prejudice.



As a Befriender, Gerry Urudra stays on the telephone line to help callers find the strength to overcome challenging issues.



Rosalind Oh, wife of Befrienders co-founder, the late Dr David Muttu, shares stories of the organisation's early days.



'It makes a lot of difference to have someone pull you through a rough patch,' says Kenny Lim.

Recipients of the Kuok Foundation's financial assistance show their gratitude to society.

By **ALLAN KOAY**
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EVER heard of a place called Beranang? No? It's OK, because not many people have either. Back when Charles Lim Chee Pang was growing up, the population of Beranang, in Selangor, was only 2,000.

His father had a sundry shop there, and the family was so poor, they used to buy one apple and cut it into nine pieces to be shared among his siblings.

Hokkien mee was a luxury they could only afford once every few months, and chicken was only for festive celebrations.

Lim, 45, who is the second youngest in his family, barely had any money for university, but with the Kuok Foundation's help, managed to graduate with an engineering degree from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

The Kuok Foundation is a non-profit charity organisation set up in 1970 by the Kuok family of Johor Baru to alleviate poverty.

Lim's friends, Dennis Yong, 44, Ng Teck Seng, 48, and Alan Poon, 35, all share similar experiences.

Ng, from Malacca, whose father passed away during his first year in university, received financial assistance from the foundation in his third year, and graduated in computer science.

Yong, who studied property management in UTM, had to beg his father, a hawker, for money to further his studies.

It was the Kuok Foundation that got him through it.

Poon started in Universiti Malaya during the worst of times. It was the Asian financial crisis of 1997. His father was retrenched. Poon had to give tuition to pay for his course in chemical engineering.

After three rounds of interviews with the Kuok Foundation, he managed to secure a loan in his second year.

"Because of the stringent way they approved applications, it

Scholars give back



(From left) Kuok Foundation scholars Dennis Yong, Alan Poon, Lim Chee Pang and Ng Teck Seng (in black shirt) are happy to help out at Bodhi Homecare Cheras in Kuala Lumpur.

forced me to work hard and try again for my second year," said Poon.

And today, they are still grateful for the help they got, and wish to pay it forward to the generations to come.

In 2007, a group of recipients of the foundation's financial assistance, known as the Kuok Foundation scholars, decided that they could do more with their network than just organise reunion dinners for themselves. They formed the Kuok Foundation Scholars Club (KFSC), got it registered and have been doing charity work until today.

In the beginning, they started off by helping at various homes, painting their playgrounds, and raising funds to improve their premises, among other things. Now, they also give inspirational and guidance talks to students, among other charitable work.

They decided to hold more activities nationwide, after getting requests from people in other states on their Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/KFSCScholars/info>).

"We held two events in Penang and Johor Baru last year," said Yong, who is the KFSC president.

"Because of our club constitu-

tion, we can only accept members who have addresses in Selangor and KL. But when we went to Johor Baru, there were 10 engineers from Singapore who were not members but only scholars, yet they contributed by guiding the students in Johor Baru.

"For those who are overseas, they can't be physically here to contribute but perhaps they could contribute in monetary terms."

According to Yong, there are 9,000 Kuok Foundation scholars all over the world today. And although membership in the KFSC is relatively low, he hopes more scholars will be aware of what the club is doing.

"A lot of them are willing to come back and do something for the club," said Ng, who is the club's advisor and immediate past president.

Among the activities held by the KFSC, two main ones stand out. The first is FunHub which is aimed at helping scholars, members and their friends to grow their network, and promote self-actualisation and develop leadership skills.

The second is the GOAL Youth Development Programme to create awareness of vocational education and careers among less privileged children.

"We guide teenagers from Form Three to Form Five," said Yong. "They are about to become school-leavers. This is especially for less privileged students such as those in orphanages, and those who are not doing so well academically."

KFSC recently held a training camp for 40 youngsters from orphanages and homes in the Klang Valley.

"We believe education can change a person's life," said Yong. "We are fortunate to have received financial aid, but there are others who are not as fortunate."

Yong was the first in his family to have a tertiary education.

Before that, his parents and grandparents believed that all one needed in life was to be able to sign a cheque, and that was good enough.

But now, because of him, he has seen how his family has changed.

"I strongly believe that education doesn't only give you knowledge but it also changes the way you think," said Yong.

"We are not your typical charity organisation," said Lim. "We don't just go out and raise funds to help poor people."

"All of us share a common background, where we all received timely assistance tied closely to education. Every one of us strongly feels that that gave us a push in life. This is the core value that binds us together."

■ *The 9th Kuok Foundation Scholars' Reunion Night will be held at Concorde Hotel, KL, on March 15. For more information, scholars can call Teong Hooi (03-7728 8446) or Pei Yan (016-281 5308), or e-mail kfscholars@gmail.com.*

Help is just a call away

No matter what your problem, the Befrienders are there to offer emotional support.

By **ANGELIN YEOW**
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THERE is a funny story behind the first call that Befrienders received back in 1970.

Rosalind Oh, wife of Befrienders co-founder the late Dr David Muttu, remembers the first phone call fondly.

"My husband was waiting in the telephone room, eagerly anticipating the first call. Finally, when the phone rang, he picked it up only to find that the person at the end of the line was fellow co-founder Dr T. Thuraiaratnam," says Oh, 78. And the first thing Dr Thuraiaratnam said was, "Hello David, have we received any calls today?"

That was probably the first and only time when a call received by the Befrienders seemed like a laughing matter.

Now into its 44th year, the Befrienders is a free and confidential counselling service for those who need emotional support.

Anyone can contact the Befrienders via its 24-hour telephone call service or e-mail. They could also request for a face-to-face appointment at the Befrienders centre.

According to statistics provided by Befrienders, the centre receives more than 50 calls a day.

Most callers want to talk about relationship woes, social difficulties, mental health issues and family problems.

No matter what is bothering them, the Befrienders will be there to listen without judgement.

Since its inception in 1970, Befrienders rely on passionate and dedicated volunteers to keep its services going.

To become a volunteer, interested applicants must sign up for an interview session. Successful applicants will have to attend an intensive eight-week Befrienders Training Course. They will learn to sharpen their listening skills and develop the confidence to deal with people who are facing a crisis.

But becoming a Befriender is no walk in the park.

"You can't become a Befriender if you've got a lot of issues in your life," says Gerry Urudra, 50, who hails from England.

"It's possible to identify or relate to some of the calls you get. But we are taught to

separate their issues from ourselves. After all, it's about them," says Urudra, who joined the Befrienders five years ago.

Leow Yew Chong, 50, was inspired to join Befrienders nine years ago after listening to some of the issues that people were facing.

"I found those issues too difficult to handle, so I felt I needed to learn how to help others," says Leow, a businessman based in Klang.

Like Urudra, Leow had to undergo an eight-week training programme.

Then, when it was time to lend emotional support, Leow realised it was more difficult than he had expected.

"I had a different idea of how Befrienders should run their services," says Leow, who had to undergo an additional four weeks of training to become a Befriender.

"You have to learn to let go of pre-conceived ideas and judgemental attitudes. I learned to look at things from different perspectives and with an open mind. Eventually, I realised that I could be of better help to others and myself by listening without prejudice," says Leow.

Support system

Fellow Befriender Kenny Lim agrees. "When I was a student many years ago, I went through a difficult period in life. I had suicidal thoughts. At that time, I realised how important it was to have a really good support system," says Lim, 39. "Having someone to pull you through really made a difference."

Lim, who has been serving in Befrienders for the past 15 years, stresses the importance of just being there for someone in their hour of need.

Contrary to popular belief, the Befrienders do not offer solutions or advice to problems. Chairman Mary Raj explains that the Befrienders' role is to listen and steer its callers towards a positive direction.

"There can be bad consequences from advice or solutions. You never know when it could be detrimental to the caller's well-being," says Mary, a Befriender since 1982.

Lim points out that most applicants are rather clueless about the role Befrienders play.

"Many come in with the aim of saving people, giving advice and solving their prob-

lems. But really, to be a Befriender, you have to be an active and empathetic listener," says Lim.

From her experience in conducting the eight-week courses, Mary finds that many people are not comfortable with just sitting and listening to others speak about their problems.

"They have the urge to say something. They think problems and worries will go away if they offer solutions or advice," says Mary.

"When you get callers who say 'tell me what to do, give me advice', it puts a lot of pressure on the Befriender. They may end up giving hasty solutions. Instead, a Befriender should empower the caller to look at their issues in their own way."

Urudra gives an example of what to do when a caller asks for advice.

"You backtrack the caller. You ask, 'what options do you think you have?' At the end of the call, they often say 'I feel so much better, thank you'. When you think about it, all you have done is steer them towards their own solutions. You didn't tell them what to do."

Mary concurs: "We help our callers to overcome their worries. We want to help them believe that they can help themselves."

■ *To be a Befriender, e-mail admin@befrienders.org.my for more details. Applicants (21 years and above) must be committed to a weekly shift of four hours. Successful applicants have to attend a training course from 10am to 1.30pm every Saturday, from March 8 to April 26. For more information, check out www.befrienders.org.my.*

Volunteer opportunities

For more volunteer opportunities, log on to www.dogoodvolunteer.com

Category	Event (NGO/Organiser)	Location	Date	Time	Contact person for registration	Event description	What volunteers will be doing
Community	Fun Teaching Tutor (Malaysian Relief Agency)	Rohingya Community School, No. 10a/10b, Jalan 18, off Jalan Kuari, KL	Ongoing	9am-12.30pm	Mohd Iqbal Tel: (03) 2697 2007	Teach basic subjects to refugee children.	Volunteers needed to teach preschool and Year One children subjects such as English and Bahasa Melayu.
Environment	CAT Walks (Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers [Mycat])	Sg Yu Tiger Corridor, Pahang	March 1 & 2	8am-5.30pm	Wong Pui May Tel: (03) 7880 3940	CAT Walks are moderate walks lasting for several hours along specific routes that have been determined by Mycat researchers or the park authorities, where your presence will help deter poaching activities.	Volunteers can enjoy trekking, bird-watching, picnics and other outdoor recreational activities in the forests within and around the wildlife corridor.
Community	Dialogue In The Dark exhibition (Dialogue In The Dark Malaysia)	Petrosains Discovery Centre, Level 4, Suria KLCC	Ongoing	10am-6pm	Lynn Foo Mobile: 017-632 0602	The exhibition consists of a series of rooms in complete darkness. Visitors, in groups of up to eight people, get a short briefing and are introduced to the use of a long cane before embarking on the journey through darkness.	Volunteers are needed daily to welcome instructors and host visitors.
Children	Year 2 Cycle 1: SMK Tengku Idris Shah (The RE:ED Project)	SMK Tengku Idris Shah, Kapar, Klang, Selangor	Ongoing	10am-12.30pm	Pow Yih Ling Mobile: 012-513 9887	Teaching children English and Mathematics with The RE:ED Project's Year 2 project.	Volunteers needed to teach Form One and Two students.
Community	Midnight Football (Global Peace Festival Malaysia)	Kelana Jaya, Petaling Jaya	March 1	Call to enquire	Archana Tel: (03) 7805 4760	Using football to create a positive impact on at-risk youngsters and their community, while teaching them sportsmanship, discipline and teamwork.	Volunteers needed to help plan and organise activities for the youngsters.