

Who helps those who help others?

Masayoe Nabilah

International Volunteer Managers Day may be over, but should our appreciation for volunteer managers stop there too? Our unsung heroes share their highs and lows, and why they should not be forgotten.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

As a child, many of us probably wanted to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, astronauts, and firemen. On the other hand, becoming a volunteer manager is not usually what we aspire to be.

It was not top priority for Mohamad Sharil bin Abdul Rahim either, until he was approached to join Ang Mo Kio – Thye Hua Kwan Hospital as a volunteer executive last year.

During the day, the jovial young man can be spotted bustling in and out of the wards and chatting with the patients with ease and charm.

However, Sharil, who previously worked at the Central Provident Fund Board, admits that he had no idea what a volunteer executive did prior to becoming one.

“Initially, I didn’t know that I would be on this path, because I come from a statutory board background,” says Sharil. “So this is a new challenge for me and I feel that it’s very rewarding.”

As a volunteer executive, Sharil juggles a multitude of responsibilities. Aside from managing volunteers and taking care of the patients, Sharil organises events and programmes, scouts for sponsors, and handles budgeting. These duties require a significant dose of patience and perseverance on Sharil’s part, qualities that also help him deal with younger, slightly inexperienced volunteers.

“One thing that our younger volunteers taught me is to be more patient. I have some volunteers who tend to skip lessons; sometimes they will leave early without me knowing,” says Sharil, chuckling as he recalls the mischievous tendencies of his teenage charges.

Between the volunteers and patients, Sharil finds it even more challenging to handle the latter. Convincing the elderly patients to take part in the hospital’s daily programmes can be a challenge, but Sharil simply puts on a friendly smile and works his charm to persuade them to give the programmes a go.

Similarly, volunteer executive Tan Zhenxiu’s road to volunteer management started from a different direction – she chose to study computing at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She realised her passion in volunteering when she joined the university’s Community Service Club. She had the opportunity to participate in various volunteering activities, of which she particularly enjoyed visits to the homes of elderly. From there, she too, like Sharil, became an advocate for the elderly at the Home Nursing Foundation.

However, the 25-year-old's relative youthfulness was initially met with uncertainty by some of the older volunteers, who doubted her ability to organise and manage volunteer programmes. But Zhenxiu has proven herself in the eyes of the elderly patients under her care, who have only positive things to say about the soft-spoken young woman. Some common refrains include "She's very nice" and "This is the girl who always brings me out".

Nonetheless, Zhenxiu remains humble.

"To me, I didn't do very much, except do my job, but they really appreciate it a lot," she says.

But like Sharil, Zhenxiu concurs that it's not a walk in the park.

"Sometimes, volunteers do not come back because they do not understand why we are doing certain things to help the patients. I have to be in the position where I have to explain to the volunteers why we are doing certain things," says Zhenxiu.

Matching suitable volunteers to jobs is also another challenge. Zhenxiu believes that it is essential to "know what your volunteers can do, and what they like to do, so we can locate them appropriately and help us better".

Both Sharil and Zhenxiu also have to contend with a lack of general awareness about what exactly they do.

"Whenever I tell people that I work in a hospital, they will think of doctors, nurses, therapists." Sharil added, "I do have my peers asking me, 'What do you do at work?'"

While most people thank volunteers for their time and help, they often forget to show their appreciation to the individuals who have painstakingly organised, coordinated and managed the programmes.

Hence, 5 November has been designated as International Volunteer Managers Day to commemorate the contributions and dedication of volunteer managers in supporting their various communities.

But even with a special day to appreciate these often underappreciated helping hands, Sharil feels that "more could be done to educate people on what we do", through a career fair, outreach programme, or perhaps even internship.

"One thing that I would like is for (more people) to have a one-day experience as a volunteer manager," said Sharil.

Ultimately, both Sharil and Zhenxiu await the day where they no longer have to explain what their profession is all about.

"I hope that one day, I can go out and say, 'I'm a volunteer manager' and people will go, 'Oh, yes, you're working for a good cause'," says Sharil.

Originally published in SALT on December 20, 2013