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Features

"Two, three minutes and my life changed"



These were Rahman Ataur Mohammad's words when he spoke of the work accident that left him with third degree burns on 73 per cent of his body. Rahman, a 23-year old-Bangladeshi ex-landscaper, now wears a cap and a handkerchief to cover his scarred face, and spends his days waiting for things to happen.

In June 2016, when Rahman still had a job and a pair of functioning hands, he was tasked to clean a water tank in a dark underground room. Rahman headed underground with a halogen lamp, not realising that gas had been accumulating in the room – which could be ignited by the merest flick of a switch. The few seconds after he switched the halogen lamp on changed the course of his life forever.

After Rahman regained consciousness, he had to come to terms with his new reality: chunks of skin were missing from his limbs, his bones were visible from under layers of his flesh in some areas, and his voice no longer sounded like his. He spent the next six months at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) where he laid in bed, wrapped in bandages, strange tubes running down his throat, and wires inserted through his fingers.

After months waiting to “heal”, Rahman was finally discharged from SGH last December. He could speak again, but his voice seemed foreign to him. Balling his hands into fists was a huge effort. He no longer had finger nails.

He is now anxious about meeting his friends and family. The co-workers he used to speak so freely with now hardly interact with him and the family that Rahman loves so dearly has not seen him since the accident, and knows little about what actually happened.

Two weeks ago, Rahman underwent the first round of reconstructive burn surgery. The 23-year-old man, against all odds, chose to look on the “bright side of things”. Rahman loves talking about his siblings, as well as his plans to support his youngest sister’s high school education (something he never got to experience himself). He wants to pick up IT skills, improve his English, and start a cow farm (“like Australia and New Zealand’s standards”) when he returns to his village in Bangladesh.

Says Rahman: “Now, it’s about trying to live a normal life.”~ Giulia Pulvirenti

Giulia is a volunteer with HOME. She first befriended Rahman while he was at the hospital and, moved by his plight, she initiated a [fundraising campaign](#) for him. Please support and donate generously to help Rahman rebuild his life.

Home for Good



Neljean at the finishing line of a marathon to raise funds for HOME; back home in the Philippines with her grandson

Jeanilyn Bermudez (or ‘Neljean’) moved to Singapore 32 years ago. In this time, she has worked for six different employers, started four new enterprises in the Philippines and has been an active member of the HOME Academy. She has decided that it is time to move back to the Philippines where she hopes to continue with her charity work, supporting what she calls the “spirit of HOME”.

You have been in Singapore for three decades now. What has it been like to work here?

I first came to Singapore to work as a domestic worker in 1984 when I was only 19. It was hard at first, I needed to adapt to the Singaporean way of life. I had a bad experience with my first employer but there was no HOME to run to then, so I had to keep going.

Since then I have been lucky; I have worked for a politician, two ambassadors and two businessmen. My last employer helped me to get an entrepreneurship qualification with Aidha. I was able to use this to save money and start social enterprises in the Philippines, employing people from my family and village.

You’ve been involved with the HOME Academy for many years now. How did this first come about?

I first saw HOME’s office at Lucky Plaza on my day off 10 years ago. I started by joining the choir group and then, a few years later, became the choir leader. I also wanted to help other domestic workers learn new skills, so I started teaching jewellery and handicraft classes.

I have also run the marathon every year since 2011. My first marathon was very important to me but the one I completed last December was the most memorable. I was able to raise over \$3,600 for HOME. I hope to keep running more marathons in the future.

Now that you are leaving, what are your hopes for domestic workers in Singapore?

I feel very sad to leave Singapore as it feels like home to me now, but I also know that I

have a new mission in the Philippines. I will be going back to become vice president of *Spirit of Home, Scalabrini Incorporation (S.O.H.O)*, where we work to support overseas foreign worker returnees who are victims of salary deductions and illegal deployment. I will also be able to spend more time with my three daughters while managing my four enterprises more easily: a rice shop, a recycling business, a beauty shop and a café.

I think that the work of HOME and the weekly day-off are very important for domestic workers in Singapore. I think it is very important to keep spreading the word about their work and to make sure more workers speak up to improve their situation. ~ Laura Maull

Laura Maull is from the UK but is now studying in Singapore while completing her PhD. She is interested in issues on migrant rights and gender equality, and spends her spare time teaching some of her other passions (baking and art) at the HOME shelter.

Comfort Food



Juliet and her son swimming at the beach back home in the Philippines

How time flies! It has been more than two months since I returned to the Philippines after 10 years of working as a domestic worker in Singapore.

One thing I had missed a lot about the Philippines was its food. I love the abundance of local crops and seafood. Fruits and vegetables are always fresh, and you can even pick them in your or your neighbours' backyard. They are so fresh that you can taste their sweetness. Rivers and seas surround our town so seafood is locally caught. Fish that I couldn't find in Singapore are my favourite. I love the fish called "*ikuran*". It is a round flat silvery fish and it tastes like heaven. They are so good I can eat a kilogram! They can grow to the size of a medium tilapia. You don't always have to go to town to buy food as some locals go house-to-house to sell their fresh produce. I eat a lot of vegetables, fruits, and fish now.

While Singapore has many varieties of fruits and vegetables mostly imported from other nearby countries, the quality of the food deteriorates by the time you cook it. It is no longer

as fresh. It is the same with meat and seafood. However, Singapore is known as a food paradise because you can find different varieties of food, from Asian to Western to Middle Eastern. What I liked about Singapore is the convenience of going to the market or to shops to get whatever you needed, and I liked how easily you could get different fresh herbs, condiments and spices.



Meals here in the Philippines are mostly communal, especially in the countryside. Our house is in a compound and, within the compound, are my relatives' houses. Food is shared with everyone once in a while, especially during special occasions. It is like having a buffet every time. Did you ever wonder why we see many Filipinos in Singapore gather for picnics and gatherings during their days off? That is because food is enjoyed more when shared.

Singapore is the opposite. Meals in Singapore homes are very "individualistic". Food is shared only among family members and only on special occasions like Chinese New Year, when friends and families gather together for a meal.

The convenience of life in Singapore, its organised ways and cleanliness: I miss these. Otherwise, it is still the Philippines for me!

Juliet Ugay was a domestic worker in Singapore for 10 years. She comes from a small town called Sta. Cecilia in Aringay, La Union province in the Philippines. She's also the

editor of HOME's MY VOICE blog and is currently taking up an online fiction writing course with Gotham Writers' Workshop.

“I was only claiming my rightful wages”



Liu (standing) with HOME staff and the lawyers who represented him pro-bono

\$457.70. Liu Huaixi was stunned by the Labour Court order. He had claimed several thousand dollars in underpaid wages.

Liu had come to Singapore hoping to better his three children's lives. Promised \$1,100 basic plus overtime, he was shocked to receive only a thousand-odd despite clocking in at least four hours' overtime every day.

But Liu was powerless. Like most other Work Permit holders, he had incurred crushing debts to pay recruitment fees. He could not afford to be terminated once he spoke up. Liu was also afraid that his company could 'blacklist' him with MOM, barring him from employment in Singapore. They had already falsely accused him of stealing.

Nearing his WP's expiry, Liu decided that he had to claim the shortfall, regardless of the risks.

Unemployable during the lengthy MOM proceedings, Liu struggled with living expenses. But he stuck it out because he wanted his rightful wages. In the Labour Court, his employer insisted—successfully—that Liu had agreed to the lower salary.

On 25 July, MOM told Liu he must leave Singapore by 28 July, otherwise he would be an illegal overstayer—despite Liu's 14-day right to appeal from 22 July (the Labour Court decision date). MOM gave him less than half that time. With only three days to find a lawyer and finalise the necessary documents, Liu felt totally defeated.

But with the encouragement and tireless efforts of HOME's case manager Luke Tan, Liu

resolved to persevere. TSMP Law Corporation answered HOME's urgent call for help.

Liu's former employer did not make it easy. When Liu managed to find work again, his old company wrote to his new employer, causing him to almost lose his new job. Liu refused to be cowed by their behaviour, despite attempts to browbeat him into settlement.

"I can accept losing. But after fighting so far, I can't give in and accept less than my rightful basic wages."

Liu's determination was vindicated when the High Court overturned the Labour Court's decision. Justice Lee Seiu Kin awarded Liu \$6,500 plus costs of \$8,000, remarking that although \$6,500 seems small in the High Court, it is very significant to Liu.

Reflecting on his victory, Liu Huaixi said, "For us migrant workers, our ability to defend ourselves is very limited. That's why this has been such a long and tortuous process for me, even though I was only claiming my rightful basic wages." ~ Desiree Leong

Desiree is a legal volunteer. She is continually humbled by what depths of richness the migrant workers at HOME have taught and given her.

Volunteers & Supporters

Theatre Time



A group of three friends, Gisela Aeschbach, Sarah Tranter and Kathy Bach, recently came together to organise a weekly two-hour theatre workshop, which sees the shelter filled with singing, dancing, acting and laughter. Each week, a group of domestic workers come together to sing, practise tongue-twisters and perform scenes.

The sessions not only allow the women to forget their troubles for the afternoon, but also help them to build confidence while developing their English language, creative and theatrical skills. As Gisela explains, "It is all about using your body and your voice as

instruments. It is very touching to see how powerful the voices and how expressive the movements of these women are when they feel confident and happy. Playing theatre is also about connecting with other people. You get to know other people quickly on a personal and emotional level without having known them before (and without speaking the same language)”.

The session often begins with a group singing exercise, and moves on to a round-robin style performance – which is occasionally interrupted by huge eruptions of laughter as groups become lost in the rhythm!

The sessions can also include ‘tongue-twister’ exercises, where elocution and pronunciation are perfected, as well as individual and group acting roles. Groups of women have to work together to build skills or just simply have fun! One of the Indonesian domestic workers who has taken part in the session, Siti Fitri Yah, said, “I really like the activity, it has a fun and friendly atmosphere!” ~ Laura Maull

Writing for a Cause



Last October, students from the Victoria Junior College Writers’ Circle held a writing workshop for a group of our shelter residents. “During the initial stages of discussing our annual publication, we wanted to make it meaningful by writing for a cause and eventually donating the proceeds to them. We chose to focus on foreign domestic workers – they hail from different backgrounds and would have rich stories unheard by many,” says editor-in-chief Venny Lewis.

The book, *Maria*, is a product of the laughter they shared, the tears they shed and a promise to serve a cause through writing. There are stories penned by the women during their time at the shelter and about their struggles working in Singapore, along with pieces by the students of Writer’s Circle who have re-imagined the stories. If you’d like a copy of the book (S\$10), please email jacqueline.tan@home.org.sg. All sales proceeds will go to supporting the shelter.

Gallery

Let's Celebrate: International Women's Day

There was no lack of engaging activities for our shelter residents during the week leading up to International Women's Day (March 8) -- from a Sentosa outing hosted by the New Creation Church to the ultra-warm reception and hospitality experienced at the Conrad Centennial Singapore! We capped off the celebrations on March 12, celebrating IWD with about 150 domestic workers at the Hollandse Club with uplifting songs, dance numbers and a costume parade.



Sentosa outing with New Creation Church





An afternoon of hands-on activities and sumptuous food at the Conrad Centennial Singapore





Domestic workers from HOME Family and the shelter celebrate women's day in colour and splendour

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