

Causes Week 2016: Youth on a mission to declutter homes

Volunteers help hoarders break the habit and reach out to the mentally ill



1 of 3 Clockwise from right, Core team members of Silver Ribbon's youth chapter Trini Low, 21, and Jonathan Kuok, 26, with volunteers Keren Lee, 25, and Gerald Tan, 21. Around them is a portion of the clutter that 25 young volunteers removed from the flat of a hoarder last weekend. PHOTO: TERRY SOON FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



[Kok Xing Hui](#)

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A 61-year-old woman has been climbing over piles of plastic bags, bottles, newspapers and cans in order to get into her Woodlands flat.

But thanks to the work of 25 young people last weekend, the woman - who will not be named - can once again use her four-room flat to sleep, cook and go to the toilet.

The "cleaners" were brought together by three psychology students, who are starting the youth chapter of mental wellness advocacy group Silver Ribbon.

Decluttering the hoarder's Woodlands home was the youth chapter's first project. Another team from the group first cleaned the woman's

flat in 2012, but over the past four years, she had returned to her old hoarding ways.

Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of Silver Ribbon, said she was approached by government agencies to help the woman, whose home was filled almost to the ceiling.

"She was showering in public toilets nearby and collecting bottles of water from the public toilet to use at home. She got cuts and bruises climbing over all the things and, because the kitchen could not be used, she couldn't have proper meals. She couldn't even sleep properly," said Ms Poh.

Convincing her to allow her flat to be cleared was no easy task. Ms Poh had to meet the woman, her relatives and government representatives more than 10 times before she agreed.

Ms Poh said hoarding behaviours are hard to break. She is hoping that the youth chapter can change things by providing care beyond the decluttering.

It will send a pair of volunteers to visit the woman regularly as a befriending service, and to monitor her hoarding behaviour.

Youth chapter team leader Jonathan Kuek, 26, a psychology student at James Cook University, said hoarders are seldom identified early on, adding: "Usually, once help reaches them, it is too late, and the hoarding has gotten out of hand."

Mr Kuek is a seasoned volunteer. For three years, he has been heading a team of 120 youth volunteers who help out weekly at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), visiting patients warded there for more than a year and organising activities for them.

Ms Poh wants him to use his leadership skills and do the same for the youth chapter.

Mr Kuek said: "I want to work with patients in the community, too."

The youth chapter, whose name has not been decided on, will befriend people with mental issues, declutter the homes of hoarders - Ms Poh gets 10 such cases a year - and do educational outreach in schools.

Helping Mr Kuek set up the youth outfit are Ms Belinda Ao, 19, who is studying psychology science at Nanyang Polytechnic, and Ms Trini Low, 21, a University of Buffalo psychology student.

Ms Poh said she is often approached by psychology students asking her where and how they can help, but there has been no formal avenue. "There are many gaps in the mental health space, and I wanted to get youth involved. So, when I met Jonathan at a conference, I harassed him into setting this up," she joked.

The young people hope to get their first pool of volunteers by February, and Ms Poh will train them in the dos and don'ts of handling patients with mental health issues.

They will then be activated when patients ask for befriending services, either when calling Silver Ribbon's hotline or when they attend counselling sessions.

"Sometimes, they will say they need someone to accompany them to see the doctor because they are feeling anxious," said Ms Poh.

"At IMH, you are just serving the chronic patients. But right now, on the ground, there could be a lot of youth suffering and they are not

comfortable to come forward. There might be some experiencing high levels of anxiety, some engaging in self-harm and some who are suicidal. So, I think it is really timely."

While the woman was sulky at having her items thrown away, her home is now clean, in time for Christmas. Her older brother Peter said the extended family had tried to clear the flat over the Deepavali weekend, but managed to clear only a metre or so of items.

"It was piled to the ceiling, you know," he said.

To make sure the place stays clean, he said he will visit his sister, who lives alone, every Sunday after church service. "I am also going to suggest that we hold cell group meetings at her place so she will keep it clean."