

A NETWORK THAT HELPS VOLUNTEERS, BENEFICIARIES

Running high on passion

Youth Without Borders may be resource-strapped, but that has not stopped its founders from doing more for the needy

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SINGAPORE – They describe themselves as “random” and “experimental” — they once attempted to travel as far away from Singapore as possible without money and made it as far as Bangkok.

But upon embarking on their latest endeavour — using social media to build a network of youth volunteers to support various community projects — Mr Joseph Tay and Mr Kenneth Yong soon realised the limits of improvising. While it sounded straightforward enough on paper — working with a home for the aged to realise wishes for its residents — it took the duo, both 24, three weeks just to get ready for their first visit to the home.

“It was anything but easy, from liaising with the home to getting the correct timing,” says Mr Tay.

Both undergraduates at the Singapore Management University, Mr Tay and Mr Yong are co-founders of Youth Without Borders (YWB), together with Mr Philip Wu, 45, a social entrepreneur who met the duo through the Now You Can Leadership series for youths.

YWB aims to engage volunteers in “win-win” relationships with beneficiaries by providing them with skills and experiences in return for their support. Motivated, perhaps, by a surfeit of optimism, they set a goal in March last year to shepherd 50 projects by 2015 — in time for Singapore’s 50th year of independence.

Just two projects have been established so far, but even if they fall short, “it is okay, because we have done it largely without government support or personal investment of a large amount of funds”, Mr Yong says.

The first is Project: One More Thing with the Lee Ah Mooi Old Age Home, where youths help fulfil the wishes of the elderly living at the home.

The second is the Leaders With Disabilities Network, which uses dragon-boating as a platform to engage people with disabilities in Singapore. This project began when some YWB volunteers started the Deaf Dragons team for hearing-impaired paddlers.

The guiding principle for YWB is the National Pledge, which they feel calls on Singaporeans to do more for the needy. Says Mr Tay: “We are all Singaporeans and we have a stake in this country that we live in ... we feel that it helps us to connect with different groups of people.”

The two favour a “pretty random” approach with YWB so that they have



“room to fail” and can improve from mistakes made. But they admit they were “scolded many times when we started out, because we were amateurish, too upfront, too direct, (and had) no protocols”.

They have since developed the patience to match their youthful exuberance, such as learning to build a relationship with the seniors they are trying to help. The biggest sign of their progress, they say, came from the manager of the Lee Ah Mooi Old Age Home, who complimented them on becoming more professional.

Project: One More Thing has gathered modest success, with around 600 “likes” on Facebook. Reflecting on how the project has been shaped

Youth Without Borders founders Joseph Tay (left) and Kenneth Yong.
 PHOTO: OOI BOON KEONG

by the platform, Mr Tay says: “For us, quite comfortably, we are sitting in school or wherever it is, updating the Facebook page ... (on social media) if you want to have a voice, you have a voice ... It makes it easier for one individual or group to create a big impact in the world. Every person that became a volunteer with Project: One More Thing came through Facebook.”

YWB has begun reaching out to secondary schools to build up their network. Says Mr Yong: “We have been invited to showcase our project in some school leadership training camps and to even invite the students to try out what we do — organise activities, raise funds if need be and just be exposed to this.”

*** THREE THINGS THEY HOPE TO CHANGE IN SINGAPORE**

Kenneth Yong

- More globally-recognised Singaporean names
- More Singaporeans to do stuff about local issues
- For Singaporeans not to pursue benefit for oneself, but also for society

Joseph Tay

- People to be more open-minded and able to accept new things
- Less reliance on the Government; ability to take responsibility to bring about what they want to see, constructively
- A sense of gratitude among Singaporeans for what they have