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Date: 2 December 2022

Headline: How being empowered has led him to become a diversity champion

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As emcee of The Purple Parade in 2020 and 2021, Mr Alister Ong is confident, jovial and engaging.

The parade – he is also its vice-chairperson – celebrates the abilities of those with disabilities, and is an example of how Singapore has taken steps to move forward to be more inclusive, shares the 29-year-old.

Born with cerebral palsy, he has always been at the receiving end of help since young. Growing up, his mother and helper would heave his stroller onto buses and also escalators at MRT stations.

These days getting around Singapore has become easier for him. Public spaces and transport in Singapore are more accessible for the disabled, compared with the 1990s and early 2000s.

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With public transport being more accessible now, Mr Alister Ong is able to commute independently. PHOTO: SPH

These changes did not happen overnight. They are the result of nationwide policies like the Enabling Masterplan. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development, the Enabling Masterplan has been developed by a group comprised of government agencies and private and people sectors, including persons with disabilities and social service agencies (SSAs). It includes recommendations in areas like creating inclusive physical environments.

With fewer physical barriers around the island, Mr Ong is now able to commute to work by himself in a motorised wheelchair.

Besides getting around Singapore, he had to overcome barriers to integrating in his schools as well. For that, he is grateful to his AWWA therapist J R Karthikeyan.

Funded by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), AWWA runs specially curated programmes and services like early intervention for pre-schoolers, education and integration

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support for children and adults with additional needs, social assistance for vulnerable families, and care services for seniors.

When Mr Ong was 14, Mr Karthik became his occupational therapist for more than a year, helping him with improving his mobility and movement, and his integration in school. This involved him working with Mr Ong's schools through AWWA's Community Integration Service (CIS) programme.

With the CIS programme, Mr Ong's alma mater Bukit Panjang Primary School relocated his classroom to the ground floor and the staff also reminded the other students to look out for him. Nanyang Junior College levelled the kerbs at the pedestrian walkway for him.

"Accessibility has always been my main consideration. If not, I won't even be able to go to school," Mr Ong says.

Therapists from the CIS programme will also educate teachers and classmates on how certain lessons, like physical education sessions, can be adapted to include students with mobility issues. Mr Karthik, now AWWA's chief executive, says: "When this happens, greater mutual understanding is fostered and friendships begin to bloom.

"You do not have to be a professional to allow inclusion and integration to happen – small tweaks can spark big changes. Acknowledging that someone has a physical disability, or even an invisible disability, and taking that first step to get to know them, is often the simplest way forward to start building a more inclusive society. It is an all-hands-on-deck approach."



Mr Alister Ong's employer has ensured clear pathways in common areas in the workplace for his motorised wheelchair. PHOTO: SPH MEDIA

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AWWA also followed through with his academic developments in university. At the Singapore Management University, lecturers allotted the Bachelor of Science (Economics) graduate extra time during exams, as his handwriting speed is affected due to motor coordination difficulties from cerebral palsy.

"I appreciate how Mr Karthik has been guiding me along to understand the social services sector and how I can use my experience to contribute. He is also a great encourager and supporter of the things I do in terms of inclusion," says Mr Ong.

He also found his support group at his church. "My friends here believed in me and showed me that there is hope and meaning in my life. They saw what's inside me that I could not see, and showed me how precious I was to them."

He now gives back through volunteering his time as a board member at Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore, an organisation that empowers individuals with cerebral palsy, and Koinonia Inclusion Network, which consults with churches to start and develop ministries for the disabled.

On contributing to a more inclusive Singapore

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Mr Ong is also part of the NCSS 40-Under-40 leadership programme, which brings together youth to discuss and enable change in the social services sector in Singapore.

From getting help to being a changemaker

Mr Ong shares that if not for the help he has received from his family, long-time helper, schools, church and SSAs, he would not be able to do the things that he is doing now.

"Even if I drop something, I will need help from others to pick it up," he says, matter-of-factly.

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Mr Alister Ong's employer has made adjustments for its workplace to be more inclusive. Among them is lowering its entry access systems in office doorways. PHOTO: SPH MEDIA

Today, Mr Ong is a popular diversity and inclusion speaker in the Asia-Pacific region and among other multinational corporations. He has travelled to countries like Australia, Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam to share his story, inspiring others who are facing challenges in their lives. The trips were replaced with virtual sessions during the pandemic, but he hopes to resume them next year and is looking forward to visiting the Philippines as well as Indonesia again.

Opening up businesses' eyes and minds to the employability of the disabled remains a pet topic for Mr Ong. His current employer, multinational human resource firm Michael Page, is a good role model for other companies.

A remote control-automated sliding door was installed for him to get to his desk seamlessly. The entry access systems in office doorways were lowered, and in common areas like the pantry and breakout room, the furniture set-up was changed to ensure a clear pathway for his motorised wheelchair.

Says Mr Nilay Khandelwal, managing director of Michael Page Singapore: "When expanding their employment search to hiring people with disabilities, companies have the opportunity to gain new perspectives and knowledge on leading true inclusive businesses. By working together to promote the awareness of their potential, we can really help companies in Singapore see the possibilities."

In his current job at Michael Page Singapore, Mr Ong leads a team that provides consultancy to clients and "empowers them to be more inclusive" in their hiring policies and practices. It is one of his ways of giving back to the community – something he likens to coming full circle – as the job lets him build more inclusive work environments.

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“It’s meaningful and purposeful for me to bring economic value to people with disabilities. It’s a good fit.”

Worried about him having to get around in a wheelchair, his parents had wanted him to work as a tutor or a desk-bound job in finance.

“They said I could stay home and earn a lot of money with these jobs but I began to ask if there could be more to life for me than just going through life by myself.”

But more often than not, these limitations are in the mind.

“We can champion inclusive hiring and in public, if we see someone needing help, we can reach out to ask if they need any. Little actions can show the meaning of empathy and compassion,” he says.

Read more stories like Mr Alister Ong's in the Stories from the Heart page. NCSS has launched Stories from the Heart in celebration of its 30th anniversary. The page features a series of 30 heartwarming human-interest stories featuring the work of SSAs, volunteers and service users.

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