

SMU grad started project to befriend migrant workers who may feel excluded

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When Siti Noormasliana Noorazman was the only Malay employee interning at an events company in 2021, she endured insensitive jokes and other microaggressions that left her feeling excluded and alone. Around the same time, news of coronavirus cases in migrant worker dormitories struck a chord with Noormasliana, who goes by the name Masliana.

She felt she could relate to the community, many of whom had been confined to the dormitories for months to curb the spread of infection.

“I understood what it feels like to be excluded,” said the 24-year-old, who was a hospitality and tourism management student at Temasek Polytechnic at the time.

This got her thinking about how she could support migrant workers. She teamed up with fellow students from her co-curricular activity, Global Connect, to host Zoom chats with workers.

She also enlisted the help of Its-RainingRaincoats, a Singapore charity that builds bridges between migrant workers and Singapore residents, to set up the calls.

Over three Zoom sessions in the last few months of 2021, Masliana and her schoolmates checked in on the mental health of migrant workers and chatted about their different cultures.

She later developed the initiative into Project Candela under Singapore Management University’s Rotaract Club – a youth develop-



Siti Noormasliana Noorazman founded Project Candela to build bridges between migrant workers and the wider community in Singapore. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

ment club – with the aim of building a bridge between migrant workers and the wider community in Singapore.

She was among 215 graduates from the SMU School of Social Sciences at the convocation ceremony held at the university on July 30. Across five days of ceremonies, more than 3,800 students graduated from SMU in 2026.

Masliana’s interest in social causes began during her polytechnic days, when she tutored children from lower-income families. Her father is a retired security officer and her mother is a retired store assistant. She has three older brothers in their 30s.

Her curiosity about policymak-

ing and social advocacy led her to major in political science and communication management at SMU.

There, she led students in conducting workshops on digital and financial literacy, as well as professional communication, for migrant workers in dormitories. They also organised activities such as badminton, yoga and drawing, and held celebrations for occasions such as Father’s Day, Deepavali and Christmas.

Some of her favourite memories are of volunteers teaching migrant workers TikTok dances and how to use Telegram stickers.

After seeing the same students every two weeks over the course of an academic year, the men became

comfortable enough to show them photos of their wives and children, sometimes even video-calling their families with them.

They would reminisce about their home towns or lives back home, with one man sharing how he used to be a lorry driver, and another talking about his studies in mechanical engineering, Masliana said.

Her own university studies also fuelled her interest in migrant worker rights and policies. She wrote a research paper on the dreams of migrant workers and the right to rest, advocating the creation of third spaces where they could have equal opportunities for rest.

LESSONS FROM THE DORMS

She recounted a memorable concluding session in which volunteers asked migrant workers to write down their wishes on Post-it notes. One man wrote that he wanted to go to Portugal.

Masliana realised that migrant workers use their limited holiday leave to visit their families back home, rather than to fulfil dreams such as travelling the world.

“What the migrant brother wrote was very simple, but it stuck with me. Listening to their stories made me aware of my privilege,” she said.

Her training in intercultural communication also changed the way she conducted sensitivity training for volunteers before they met the migrant workers.

For instance, she tells volunteers why she does not like the term “migrant workers” – it highlights that they are from another country and associates them with labour.

“So we just call them friends. They’re all brothers,” she said.

Recalling one student’s mistake of speaking to a migrant worker like a child, Masliana said many people assume the men cannot speak English, when some are in fact fluent in the language.

Over the past six years, Project Candela has reached around 200 migrant workers and 100 volunteers.

Masliana, who graduated from SMU with merit, now works as a research assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies. She dreams of starting a non-profit organisation to advocate for the migrant worker community.

She hopes it will be able to partner organisations already supporting migrant workers – such as the clinic HealthServe – to further their shared goals.

She is also considering pursuing a Master of Science in Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, which focuses on military power, defence policy and regional security in the Indo-Pacific.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Masliana’s ambition is to shift societal perceptions.

“When we see a migrant brother, one might think, ‘Oh, probably a construction worker’.

“But there’s more than meets the eye. Migrant brothers have diverse backgrounds... I wish that Singaporeans would move beyond these labels or stereotypes and just view them as people.”

She also marvelled at how easy it was to connect with the migrant workers despite the language barrier.

“Every time we went to the dorms, we bought snacks for them as an incentive to complete the programme, and they were very happy about the snacks. They would send photos of the snacks to their families.

“It’s just a biscuit. But it is really about the simplicity of life and supporting one another.

“And if we could tap that learning point and apply it in our community, I think that would be fantastic,” she added.

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