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By Christine Tan

The Straits Times, Prime, Page 13, Section: SINGAPORE
Friday 9 October 2026
871 words, 858cm² in size
386,100 circulation



Rachel Goh and Ethan Tan of Project Obscura, an initiative which received the Communities for Good (Groundup) award at the President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards on Oct 7. ST PHOTOS: BRIAN TEO



Ashsufi Hussin (left) started a free mathematics tuition initiative, while Shoken Tsurumaru founded a non-profit platform for people to turn special occasions such as birthdays and weddings into opportunities for charitable giving.

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Christine Tan
Correspondent

An ovarian cancer patient who was told she had only months to live had one last wish – to make a video of her life to be played at her funeral.

But quotations from private production houses cost up to \$10,000, beyond the budget of Ambulance Wish Singapore, the charity handling her case that grants the wishes of terminally ill patients.

A group of students stepped in, offering to do a video and photo shoot for free.

On a golden-hued evening in April, they captured moments of the patient and her husband on their usual walking route around MacRitchie Reservoir.

“She said she never even had a wedding photo that was like that, and it felt like she was doing it all

over again – living life,” said Ethan Tan, 22, co-founder of Project Obscura, an initiative that does pro bono photography services for social service agencies and underprivileged groups.

On Oct 7, the ground-up initiative was among 17 individuals, organisations and partnerships recognised at the President’s Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards 2026 for making a positive impact on the community.

It received the Communities for Good (Groundup) award.

The awards received a record 455 nominations this year, and also introduced a new category to recognise young givers aged 17 to 25.

The idea for Project Obscura started in December 2022, when Tan and his former Eunoia Junior College classmates Rachel Goh, 23, and Clarence Chua, 23, wondered if they could lend their photography skills to charities that may not have the budget to afford such ser-

vices.

Goh was then a first-year English literature undergraduate, while Tan and Chua were in national service. They sent out e-mails to multiple organisations, but progress was slow at first.

“People were a bit sceptical of the professionalism we could bring, especially if it came to high-level events,” said Goh.

“It’s very difficult to put 100% trust in these three random kids.”

However, they gradually built their portfolio and word spread.

Project Obscura has since photographed more than 170 events and delivered over 50,000 photos to charities and beneficiaries.

It now has more than 330 in its volunteer pool, and it also mentors underprivileged groups in photography skills.

Its services are free when beneficiaries are directly involved, such as in the case of the ovarian cancer patient. For events of a more cor-

porate nature, such as charity galas, it charges below-market rates.

Of the fees collected, 80% goes to the volunteer photographer and 20% funds the initiative’s operations.

The group also receives support from various sources, including \$35,200 from the Youth Action Challenge Grant under the National Youth Council.

The founding trio do not take a single cent from this project and hope to do this for life, said Goh, who is pursuing a master’s in English literature at the National University of Singapore.

Tan is now a third-year law student at Singapore Management University, while Chua is reading medicine at Nanyang Technological University.

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam was guest of honour at the Oct 7 awards ceremony at Raffles Hotel, which was organised by the National Volunteer and Philan-

thropy Centre.

Also in attendance at the event was Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Education David Neo.

Among the winners in the new People of Good (Youth) category was 17-year-old Shoken Tsurumaru, who founded Giveinstead.sg at the age of 14 in 2023.

The non-profit platform encourages people to turn special occasions such as birthdays and weddings into opportunities for charitable giving.

The United World College of South East Asia student had been inspired by a family friend who asked friends to donate to a fund-raiser instead of giving birthday gifts.

Giveinstead.sg has since worked with over 2,100 donors and 36 charity partners, raising over \$325,000 through various campaigns.

One birthday fund-raiser helped

pay for violin and dance lessons for 30 children from low-income families through SHINE Children and Youth Services. The children later performed at a concert for their families and friends.

“The real joy that comes out of this is seeing how much it helps others,” said Tsurumaru, a Singapore permanent resident.

The other youth award recipient was Ashsufi Hussin, 23, a final-year NTU mechanical engineering student who started a free mathematics tuition initiative.

The BrightGuides Programme, which Ashsufi started with support from the Muslimin Trust Fund Association in July 2025, has over 40 volunteers supporting more than 25 underprivileged students.

Tuition sessions are held at Salim Mattar Mosque in MacPherson and the An-Nur Mosque in Woodlands. Ashsufi hopes to extend the programme beyond the Muslim community.

“I believe there are a lot more youth out there who are much more creative than I am, who have so many more ideas than I do,” said Ashsufi.

“I hope more will step forward.”

yujiatan@sph.com.sg