



Ms Tham (left) and Ms Ong have been going around with volunteers to spread cheer by giving high-fives to commuters at Raffles Place MRT station and encouraging motorists in Dhoby Ghaut and Orchard areas to sound their horns if they are having a good day. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

'Ambushing' commuters for a smile

Project Hello Stranger volunteers try to bring back the kampung spirit

■ BY LESLIE KAY LIM

MOTORISTS and train commuters have recently been "ambushed" by volunteers in a bid to make Singapore a friendlier and happier place.

The volunteers are part of a movement called Project Hello Stranger, co-founded in February by recent Singapore Management University graduates Tham Yining, 23, and Valerie Ong, 22. It banks on guerilla street campaigns and social media to bring smiles to people's faces.

The pair were inspired to take on a meaningful project as they approached graduation and decided to revive the old kampung spirit of friendliness.

"Singaporeans are innately nice, it's just that our fast-paced life has moulded us to be a bit self-protective. As long as we find a way to spark off the niceness, it shows," said Ms Ong.

The group, consisting of 20 core members ranging in age from 19 to 27, includes tertiary students, national servicemen and those already in the workforce.

Two campaigns have been held so far, with the first in March targeting motorists in the Dhoby Ghaut and Orchard areas.

Members held up signs with the words "Honk if you're having a great day" when the motorists were idling at red lights.

Not only did that put a smile on the faces of drivers who sounded their horns

good-naturedly, but pedestrians also got into the act, waving and snapping pictures with the volunteers.

The second campaign was held last week at the Raffles Place MRT station.

Lining up along the escalators, the volunteers handed out high-fives to the pleasantly surprised commuters.

Negative responses so far have been rare and the few that have occurred have only served to spur on the group.

"It makes us motivated because it shows our project is here for a reason," said Ms Tham. Project Hello Stranger plans to have a street campaign every three weeks. Though details about the next one are under wraps, the group let on that it will be linked to Mother's Day and likely be held in the heartland.

They are also building up to a bigger event in June, with the aim of encouraging strangers to interact with one another. They plan to engage more than 150 volunteers and thousands of participants and are currently talking to companies and foundations about funding.

Ms Tham and Ms Ng have also touched base with people behind other youth initiatives, such as Mr Josiah Ng's viral While You Were Sleeping campaign which encourages participants to leave a drink or snack for a sleeping stranger along with a word of encouragement.

The two groups discussed bringing together fellow would-be project organisers to meet and offer support and advice.

Said Mr Ng of the wave of youth-initiated endeavours: "The future belongs to the youth, and it's heartwarming to see them at this age thinking about making the world a better place."

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