

# B | HOME

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CAREGIVING NOT A PROBLEM

**It's not easy to care for old people, I do feel tired. But I don't see it as a problem, we're in the same circumstances anyway. We rely on each other.**



MR LEE CHO POON

ashes were kept.

Mr Lee said that although he was saddened by the deaths of his friends, he accepted it as a natural part of life. "It's how things go - you are born, you grow old, you get sick, then you die," he said.

He is prepared to do the same for Mr Neo, who was his neighbour for around 20 years before moving in with him in 2017.

Mr Neo's younger brother had wanted to put him in an old folks' home as he was unable to care for him. But Mr Neo, who has dementia and is hard of hearing, had asked to live with Mr Lee instead.

Mr Neo was present when The Straits Times visited Mr Lee, but could not be interviewed due to his condition. The pair live simply in a sparsely furnished flat.

Both live on financial assistance of \$500 each a month, as Mr Lee's savings from his busking days ran out a long time ago.

A Singapore permanent resident, Mr Lee said he does not know his nationality as his parents never told him.

He said that he pays \$330 a month for rental before utilities, and spends about \$15 to \$20 daily on food for both of them. He will sometimes use the remaining funds to buy clothes for Mr Neo.

Each day, Mr Lee rises at 7am to push Mr Neo in his wheelchair to a nearby hawker centre for breakfast. He prepares their lunch and dinner and also bathes Mr Neo.

Mr Lee acknowledged that it can get tiring at times, especially given Mr Neo's condition.

He said that Mr Neo will sometimes forget to turn off the tap in the bathroom, causing it to flood, or will shout at him for not preparing food the way he likes.

"It's not easy to care for old people, I do feel tired. But I don't see it as a problem, we're in the same circumstances anyway. We rely on each other."

"I had no siblings of my own, so I treat him as my older brother. The three of them, they are like my brothers to me," he said, referring to Mr Liu and Mr Lee as well.

Asked how he has managed to keep a positive spirit through everything, he said: "I have nothing to be upset about, I have no burden. So why shouldn't I be happy?"

"I live by these values: determination, compassion, patience and perseverance," he added.

And Mr Lee, who has spent years taking care of others, does not expect anyone to do the same for him.

He said that when he is no longer able to walk, he intends to check himself into a nursing home as he has "no unfinished business".

But till then, he intends to keep caring for Mr Neo for as long as he can. He said: "As long as I have the strength, I will continue to do this."

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Mr Lee Cho Poon with Mr Neo Cheng Liang, who uses a wheelchair. For years, Mr Lee has opened his heart and home to a few of his fellow seniors, caring for them like they are his family members. His current housemate, Mr Neo, who has dementia and is hard of hearing, chose to live with Mr Lee in 2017 instead of being put in an old folks' home. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

# Singapore's caregiver extraordinaire

**83-year-old retired busker wins caregiver award for taking in and caring for the needy elderly**

Timothy Goh

When 80-year-old Liu Xiao Zhong died in his sleep on a cheap mattress on the floor of Mr Lee Cho Poon's one-room rental flat in Ang Mo Kio in 2011, Mr Lee arranged his funeral, mourned and paid his respects to him.

Four years later, in 2015, another elderly man, Mr Lee Wen Qiang, who was in his 70s, died in the same flat. Once again, Mr Lee Cho Poon helped arrange the funeral, mourned for him and ensured his ashes were placed in a temple.

Mr Lee was not related to either of the men, whom he met on the street while busking.

But the 83-year-old retiree told The Straits Times that he considered them his brothers, hence cared for them in the same way he does now for his latest housemate, 86-year-old Neo Cheng Liang.

"We are all in the same boat - we have only each other to rely on."

Mr Lee has, over the past decade, not only opened his home to the three men, but also fed and clothed them on the little savings he had.

For all that, Mr Lee received the Singapore Patient Caregiver Award last Friday.

The award, which has been around since 2014, is given out by Tan Tock Seng Hospital to honour caregivers for their strength, resilience and unwavering dedication

in caring for their loved ones amid challenges.

Although grateful, Mr Lee said he did not do what he did for recognition. Speaking in Mandarin, he said: "I'd take care of them even if I didn't get an award. This is just my way of caring for others."

He said that when he was young, his adoptive mother taught him to care for the elderly, a lesson he still remembers today.

"They used to say, do everything you can within your ability to take care of them, it's a blessing to be able to help others."

Mr Lee is no stranger to hardship and isolation.

He said that when he was younger, his adoptive father, who smoked opium and gambled, would regularly beat and abuse him.

So, he ran away from home in his 20s and never looked back, becoming a travelling salesman and living in various rental apartments around Singapore for the next 40 years or so.

He eventually became a busker, playing the erhu (a two-stringed Chinese instrument) and singing in various locations. He moved into his current rental flat in Ang Mo Kio in the late 1990s.

Mr Lee never married, the result of an itinerant lifestyle.

He recounted how he met Mr Liu on the streets of Chinatown in the early noughties.

He was busking and Mr Liu put a \$50 note into his collection tin, an amount Mr Lee felt was too large to accept.

"I told him, 'Sir, you should take this money and buy something for

yourself to eat instead. You're old and don't have a job. It's good enough that you're listening to me play'," Mr Lee said.

Afterwards, the two struck up a conversation and a friendship developed.

Around 2009, Mr Lee received a call from Mr Liu asking for help.

Mr Liu was suffering from incontinence, and his housemate at the time, fed up with this, had kicked him out of the flat they were sharing. Mr Lee recalled: "I said, 'why don't you come and live with me? I'm alone as well.'"

So Mr Liu moved in with Mr Lee, who bought his meals, cooked for him, took him to the doctor, bathed him and even changed his diapers.

And when Mr Liu died in his sleep, Mr Lee carried out his last rites with the help of an undertaker, ensuring that his remains were kept in Kong Meng San monastery.

A few years after Mr Liu's death, Mr Lee Wen Qiang, whom Mr Lee had also met while busking, called him asking for help.

Mr Lee Wen Qiang had also been kicked out of his apartment by his housemate, who found him too dirty to live with, said Mr Lee.

So he invited him to live in his flat, caring for him in the same way he did for Mr Liu, until one morning in 2015 when he discovered that his housemate had died in his sleep.

"I tried to wake him up for breakfast, but when he didn't respond, I realised that he was gone," he said.

So once again, he went to the undertaker and carried out his housemate's last rites, placing his ashes in the same monastery where Mr Liu's

# Stiffer penalties for errant motorists from Nov 1

Jean Iau

Motorists who drive dangerously will face harsher penalties from next month under changes made to the Road Traffic Act in July.

Penalties that impose heavier jail terms and fines kick in on Friday. However, offences that can lead to a motorist's licence being suspended or revoked take effect in the second half of next year, said the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) last Friday.

The changes will also mean that

the duration of a sentence will depend on the extent of harm caused by an errant motorist.

Harm can be categorised on a descending scale, from death to grievous hurt, hurt and endangering life.

Repeat offenders who drive dangerously and cause death will face a maximum of 15 years in jail, compared with the current penalty of up to five years' jail.

A first-time or repeat offender can be suspended from driving immediately, forfeit his vehicle and be disqualified from driving for 10

**The MHA said the increase in the range of offences that entail minimum disqualification periods, immediate suspension and vehicle forfeiture means irresponsible motorists will be kept off the roads for longer periods of time and in a more timely manner.**

years, under the amended Act.

It classifies irresponsible driving into two offences: reckless or dangerous driving and careless driving, which involves driving without reasonable consideration.

Dangerous driving involves motorists driving even though they should have known that they were not in the right condition to do so, while careless driving penalises motorists for not exercising caution when the road situation demanded it.

Any driver who commits either of-

fence under the influence of alcohol or drugs will be liable for additional penalties, which will run consecutively.

Motorists who show extremely poor driving behaviour, such as drink driving, driving against the flow of traffic, swerving across lanes at high speed or speeding through pedestrian crossings without the right of way, face heavier jail terms and fines.

The MHA said the increase in the range of offences that entail minimum disqualification periods, immediate suspension and vehicle forfeiture means irresponsible motorists will be kept off the roads for longer periods of time and in a more timely manner.

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