THE SUNDAY TIMES | SUNDAY, JUNE 15, 2025



ing eyes and thick lashes. some and they ask, 'Is this your post-operation complications.

The divorced retiree is the sole when I'm eating," he says. When he caregiver of his only child, who was wakes up with a start, he rushes to born with an extra chromosome, bathe his son before his bedtime. resulting in multiple disabilities. He relies on his Central Provi-While Zai Quan can walk, he is dent Fund retirement account savnon-verbal and relies on his father ings to get by, as well as help from for everyday activities.

married, much less become a lower-income families, and social father. Looking for love was a service agency Singapore Cancer luxury for the bachelor, who Society, plus subsidies from worked long hours as a building various organisations. technician, among other roles. In The team from cancer non-profit

introduced to her. He was 53. them to any abnormalities.

The stress of raising Zai Quan residents' committee. created a rift in their marriage and He says it is not easy to take care his former wife left their marital of a child with special needs, listing home several times over the years. the never-ending inconveniences Their divorce was finalised in May he has to bear, from cleaning fae-2020 and Mr Phua had sole custo- ces off clothing to keeping his temdy of their then 10-year-old son. per in check when his son refuses He quit his job as a mechanical to obey. and engineering site supervisor in But when he is reading from a

the construction industry to take poster of fruits to Zai Quan for the care of his son in late 2019. Six photo shoot, he reveals a different months later, he had to undergo side surgery for Stage 2 prostate cancer. A big smile replaces his frown as Unhappy with his domestic hel- he hugs his son. His voice softens. Senior Correspondent per's quarrelsome ways, he let her Zai Quan sits in rapt attention go in 2021 and took over caring for when his father talks to him, smil-Zai Quan full time in their three- ing and grunting. This means that : Childhood falls were an ordeal for room flat in Ang Mo Kio.

he cooked the previous night. While Zai Quan is in school, Mr lectual stimulation. Phua does household chores, including washing clothes his son "Papa's last wish is to find a good i me up from behind." may have soiled, and makes dinner. home for you." The self-taught cook says his Stephanie Yeo early meals "cannot make it", but

now, he knows his way around seasonings and considers his fried chicken and pork "quite tasty, very nice". He mashes his son's food by hand as he has no blender. Once Zai Quan returns home in the late afternoon, it is time for him to eat and shower before being tucked into bed between 10pm and midnight.

Mr Phua says his movements have been slower since his hernia operation in 2023, making daily tasks a challenge. During a particularly trying period two years ago, he had to postpone his operation as his son

pitalised for two weeks.

fell sick with flu and had to be hos-Later, he scrambled to find a

When Mr Ben Phua, 69, takes a bus place for Zai Quan to stay while he with Zai Quan, 14, strangers some- himself was admitted for his surtimes compliment the boy's strik- gery, and was relieved when Assisi Hospice accepted the boy for about "They say Zai Quan is so hand- 90 days, especially since he had grandson?' I say, 'No, this is my On some days, he admits, he just runs out of steam. "I fall asleep

government initiatives such as Mr Phua never intended to get ComCare, a social safety net for

his spare time, he upgraded him- 365 Cancer Prevention Society, self through night classes at the former Vocational and Industrial which used to dispense financial assistance to Mr Phua, currently supports him and his son with At his mother's behest, he mar- home visits, texts and phone calls. ried a 26-year-old Chinese nation- Father and son enjoy the occaal in 2009 within weeks of being sional day out, thanks to activities organised by the cancer society The couple were blindsided and Club Rainbow, a charity that when their baby was born with supports children with chronic illspecial needs in November 2010, nesses. Mr Phua also looks forward he says. The doctor had not alerted to receiving vegetables and dry groceries every month from the

he is happy, Mr Phua says.

early, he reheats for him the food Zai Quan will end up in a nursing i afraid of falling down, but getting live with them. home, where he will have no intel-Turning to his son, he says: ary school, my friends had to pull





For the past five years, Mr Steven Eng has been tending to the daily needs of his son William, who has muscular dystrophy. These include putting on a ventilator to help with his breathing. PHOTO: LIANHE

## Dad quits job to care for son with muscular dystrophy



Venessa Lee

Mr William Eng. back up was tiring. Initially, I could get up on my own. But by second-

of support as their family grappled with his condition. ary 3 because he did not take his give up his career to care for him.

to the main road to hail a taxi for action, taking leave from work to them, retracing that route upon alternate 12-hour shifts at his son's venessal@sph.com.sg

main carer for many years. When his siblings grew older, they nod or train his eye at one letter machine - to enable him to be cared

would leave him food and water on after another, forming words like for at home. As part of SG60 efforts, the table before they left for the day, "pain" for his father to write on the TTSH Community Fund is holding bringing him a dabao (takeaway) paper, indicating to hospital staff a fund-raising campaign, This Simple meal when they got home. Mr Steven Eng was working as a The decision to care for his son \$180,000 to support its patients. For contractor, specialising in signage full time was easy for the senior more information, go to painting and facilities mainte- Eng. "I told the hospital, please let for sg/ttshsimpledream

from traditional Chinese medicine When Mr William Eng was 29, he has been helping his son with daily

radic visits to the hospital. they had to seek treatment in any week at its Bishan location.

consume brews with ingredients slept about three hours a day.

Phua feeds the boy a cup of Milo in With the boy turning 15 in No- walked. Unbeknown to him, his Steven Eng, who is his full-time ities such as therapy, art and craft, He helps his son use a cough between getting him ready to vember and Mr Phua almost in his unusual gait was a symptom of caregiver; his stepmother, a 56- and sports like powerchair foot- assist machine, which clears his board the school bus to Minds seventh decade, the issue of who muscular dystrophy, a condition in year-old cashier; and an uncle, 58, ball, in which players use special airways and supports his breathing Fernvale Gardens School in the late will take care of his son weighs; which muscles weaken over time. who works part-time as a cleaner. ised electric wheelchairs to play a by removing phlegm from his morning. heavily on his mind. The second of If his son manages to wake up four siblings, Mr Phua worries that easily and frequently. I wasn't aged between 25 and 36, do not He also spent several years Mr Eng works out for an hour

years, his dad has been a bulwark the association.

examinations for that grade the Mr William Eng was rushed to by then, and dropped out of school. cough, pneumonia and a congested other." He adds: "It's not tiring car-Thus began a period of social isolung. lation that lasted around 14 years. During his 2½-month stay at Tan Mr William Eng demurs. "My Although he soon acquired a Tock Seng Hospital, which included father toils the most. He has sacrimanual wheelchair through a about a month in intensive care, he ficed a lot. Especially in Asian family friend, lifts would not be underwent intubation, whereby a society, people might ask, why installed at his family's HDB block breathing tube is inserted; and sub-aren't you working? It's rare to find in Tampines for several years. On outings, his father would creates an opening through the carry him down the four flights of neck directly into the trachea or says, referring to how the male steps from their three-room flat on windpipe, to provide an airway and emperor penguin incubates the the third floor; seat him at the remove secretions from the lungs. egg while the female goes away to coffee shop downstairs; and walk Mr Steven Eng sprang into hunt at sea.

During this time, Mr William Eng members. says he had "no peers", save for one When Mr William Eng could not Tock Seng Hospital through its secondary school friend who speak for a few weeks, his father, services and the TTSH Community visited him faithfully. His late who cannot write in Chinese or Fund, which has provided him with paternal grandmother, who used to English, used a board with letters medical equipment – a hospital bed, live in their household, was his and numbers to decipher what he suction machine, ventilator, oxygen

He found out, through medical nance. For close to 20 years, he me take care of my son. I can prochecks ahead of registering for woke at 5.30am for work, return- vide one-on-one, 24-hour care. national service, about his muscular dystrophy at the age of 15.

limited time with his disabled son.

Rather than having a helper or one of his siblings help out, I might as Before that, he and his family had For a year in the 1990s, he worked well do it. I am old (and can give up cycled through unsuccessful at- in construction by day and held a my work)," he says in Mandarin. tempts at managing his symptoms, night job making soya bean milk at He quit work on New Year's Day including acupuncture; making him a factory. Money was tight and he in 2020.

like seahorse and frog legs; and spo- came into contact with Muscular activities such as going to the bath-Dystrophy Association (Singa- room, showering and clothing him, Mr Eng says they did not know pore) and spent most days of the and giving him medicine. He also puts on a ventilator for the younger Their daily routine is simple but tressful, Mr Phua says.

If only he had the time to read to the children, he could regular way. "We didn't know the could regular way. "We d Zai Quan tends to wake up late if he has trouble sleeping. So, Mr

There is just too much to do at he primary school, he tiptoed as he lives with his 59-year-old father

There is just too much to do at primary school, he tiptoed as he lives with his 59-year-old father

The eldest of four children, he him more mobility and independence, he filled his days with activation afternoon.

For the past five years, Mr Eng

designing greeting cards and labels daily, stretching and using dumb From Mr William Eng's teenage for work projects gained through bells, to keep up his strength so he continues to be able to carry his But a health crisis struck on son when necessary. The pair, who enjoy watching

Christmas Eve 2019, further weaken-He was about to repeat Second- ing him and prompting his father to movies together, attest to their close relationship Mr Steven Eng says: "We are year before. But he could not walk hospital with high fever, a hacking friends, we speak directly to each

ing for my own child.'

sequently a tracheotomy, which a daddy caregiver." "I call him Penguin Daddy," he

## hospital bedside with other family

• Mr William Eng is supported by Tan needed. The younger Eng would concentrator and cough assist Dream Of Mine, which aims to raise

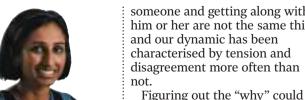
## she wants him to place his hands. that saw primary and secondary She was awarded the Singapore stephyeo@sph.com.sg

**Yamini Chinnuswamy** 

I am not, nor have I ever been, a

Correspondent

## Time to embrace our grumpy boomer dads this Father's Day



Caught in mid-air, she seems to At age 13, she won her first gold

coaxes, as she tries to explain how ing one of the worst haze seasons 2021.

Figuring out the "why" could probably fuel years of therapy. But in some ways, it is a tale as old as time, one with the title of "Inter-generational Conflict". He is to replace the old. But the a boomer, she is a millennial – can i millennial-boomer gap is they overcome their differences

National taekwondo athlete Diyanah Agidah Muhammad Dian Khudhairi has grown closer to her father, Mr Muhammad

was not always like this.

dents to learn the martial art.

medal in an inter-school competi-

graphs yet another angle for the businesswoman Maslin Mashu- seas trips from 2017 to 2023, and

"You need to teach me," he from an asthma attack in 2015, dur- work for additional income from

of their close relationship. But it grandmother.

Diyanah saw her father only during Tampines.

year younger meant Diyanah spent because it was only us."

she and her brother used to see mother's home in Pasir Ris.

nah Aqidah Muhammad Dian a love for taekwondo when she made it a point to drive up to Kuala Having to train or compete

Khudhairi, 26, aims a series of flyentered Edgefield Secondary Lumpur with his mother and Divaoverseas regularly has also

ing kicks just in front of her father's School, which required all its stu-nah's brother to see her compete in taught her to treasure time

Mr Muhammad Dian Khudhairi tion and got hooked, giving up her sporting endeavours financially, as has worked to support his

Mohamed Ali, 52, stands still, not drama club co-curricular activities Diyanah's sport involves numerous children and her dreams

flinching at all as she runs and leaps to focus solely on taekwondo. By training sessions and competitions despite the upheavals they

gamely poses as Diyanah choreo- She was just 16 when her mother, ported Diyanah's training and over- keeps me in his prayers."

ri, then aged 40, suddenly died she took on part-time coaching

years old and has another son, now lems, I will listen."

"This is the easiest one, papa," schools closing for a day. Sport Exactly Sport Exactl

and bronze medals at the 2023 SEA ting their new flat in Changi Village Scholar-

them into their maternal grand- not want to separate the siblings time.

Thanks to his stern demeanour, for meals or to hang out at his 2025.

Their easy banter is a reflection brother were still living with their 2024, which

Her parents' divorce when she feel that my world was gone, but I financial bur-

was aged six and her brother just a felt I had to take care of my brother den and al-

most of her childhood without her Since her brother chose to contrain for the 2025

After the split, her mother moved grandmother, Mr Dian says he did 2026 Asian Games full

mother's flat in Sengkang, and and move Diyanah to his home in Diyanah will graduate

the occasional extended family He started spending weekends studies and marketing at

their father as "a scary guy - "I wanted to make them feel that I lly "awkward" to have her

whenever he comes, it means he would always be around for them," father more present in her

Her mother later remarried and cian, who chauffeurs Diyanah to "But because I don't have

Meanwhile, Diyanah discovered volved work trips overseas, he and my family," she says.

the 2017 SEA Games.

Secondary 3, she made team cap- overseas. The Singapore Taekwon- have gone through.

divorced again. Mr Dian also re- training sessions whenever he can. my mum, I thought, what if

married when Diyanah was nine "I told them if they have prob- I lose my dad one day? So, I

says Mr Dian, a senior lab technilife

ready, while Diyanah and her ship

Divanah recalls: "I didn't really the family's

tinue living with their maternal SEA Games and

with them instead, taking them out SIM University later in

Even though his role then in- more time with my dad

Besides giving her advice on her Diyanah says she recog-

competitions, he supported her nises how hard her father

do Federation also partially sup- "I feel like he always

lowed her to

with a degree in sports

She admits it was initia-

eventually tried to spend

with her loved ones.

Dian Khudhairi Mohamed Ali, since her mother's death in 2015. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Taekwondo

champ flies

high with

emotional

father's

support

Stephanie Yeo

defy gravity.

**Senior Correspondent** 

face as the camera clicks.

at him in another pose.

National taekwondo athlete Diya-

The football and silat player tain.

daddy's girl. Quite the opposite, in fact, because my father and I have and get along as father and always had a spiky relationship. Generational conflict is deeply Do not get me wrong – he loves woven into human consciousness.

someone and getting along with : In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus, him or her are not the same thing, the king of the gods, dethroned and imprisoned his father Kronos, the king of the Titans – who himself had castrated and killed his father, Uranus.

> These tales embody the fact that generational conflicts are inevitable in a society where new generations continuously pop up particularly fraught, and has been the topic of many a think piece this past decade. Baby boomers were born in the years immediately following



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

INSPIRING.

These Singaporeans show their love in the

small details that make a huge difference in

their children's lives

World War II, into a world that was full of hope and potential. They grew up amid the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Nation-building was the order of the day for many Asian countries that were now rid of colonial shackles, including not just Singapore but also India, where my father was born and raised before he immigrated here in the 1980s. This climate shaped him and his

fellow boomer men into fathers who were stoic, frugal and stubborn. While their wives cooked, cleaned and reared children, my dad and his boomer colleagues worked long days at the office so they could rise above their stations and take advantage of the abundance of career opportunities available to them. In contrast, millennials like me grew up in the weird 1990s, obsessed with tie-dye and Beanie Babies plush toys. Life was comfortable, and the ravages of world wars were ancient history -

I personally was much more interested in the World Wide Web, and how it brought me closer to the exciting and intriguing world of Western pop culture. Together with my peers, I

matured into an adult who

wanted more out of life than to gibberish to me. just eat, sleep and work. Or in the eyes of boomer fathers everywhere: We became lazy, entitled and mercurial procrastinators who would rather spend money enjoying an avocado toast than saving it for our future

mortgages. No wonder my dad and I have clashed so often – we approach life with two fundamentally incompatible philosophies and outlooks. Though it does not help, of course, that he is as stubborn as i overthrown by Zeus, not long I am easily "triggered", to cite two is after he himself overthrew other stereotypes of our respective generations.

But as I hit my late 30s, the millennial domination that I took for granted in my 20s and early

30s is fading. Gen Zs, who were born in the 2000s, and Gen Alphas, who were born in the 2010s, have become the cultural tastemakers or agenda-setters, in ways that make me feel old and weary. Skibidi? Gyat? It is all

Adding insult to injury are the mocking memes of millennial cultural hallmarks by these Gen Z and Gen Alpha upstarts. Nothing is safe, from our penchant for ankle socks to the millennial pause, which is the brief pause that

millennials tend to make at the start of our videos, just to confirm that recording has started. Allow me a brief moment of melodrama to ask: Was this how Kronos felt when he was

I might just be starting to understand the grumpiness that my dad and his fellow boomers have directed towards my

generation this last decade or so, and how they might have felt when we dismissed their gripes with our blunt retorts of "OK, boomer". Especially because boomers are

experiencing this same sea change too. And they are witnessing it through the same eyes that have also lived through the psychedelic 1960s, Y2K and everything in between. It is even more remarkable

considering that my father grew up in a rural farm in India, playing i my father who asked me why I in the dirt and as blissfully unaware of the wider world as his Singaporean counterparts in their kampungs.

In the 1950s, artificial intelligence was the province of speculative fiction, and barely anyone had access to computers. But in 2025, people are using ChatGPT for everything from doing their homework to designing workout regimens. Considering the extreme

societal shifts that have occurred in just a few decades, it is admirable how progressive my father is. He came of age when men were the strict, authoritarian figures of home and office, but he never expected his two daughters - my elder sister and me – to obediently fall into traditional gender roles.

Even as I felt obliged to follow the "practical" path of a Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) vocation, it was was not instead pursuing journalism, a profession I had clearly been interested in since primary school.

When I struggled through my 20s to forge any semblance of a career, he would have been well within his rights to ask me just what my life plans or goals were, given that I was still living in his household, consuming groceries and electricity he was paying for. He never did. Instead, like many

acts of service. He drove me to and from appointments, even though I have had my own driving licence for over a decade; he woke up in the middle of the night on multiple occasions to help me dispose of lizard invaders; he sent me information about the latest savings interest rate promotions.

Asian fathers, his love language is

what help was needed.

But time is a punishing master, and the boomer fathers of Singapore – many of whom continued as their families' de facto breadwinners, chauffeurs and handymen well after their prime years – are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, and facing the reality of their mortality.

My dad and his peers must now rely on their millennial children to fulfil these roles instead – a humbling experience given that they had been raised to be the protectors and providers of their

statesmen of society to the rising

enter their twilight years. Rather than being like the ancient Greek gods who summarily dismissed their patriarchs, maybe it is time to put away the eye rolls when Dad scoffs at overpriced things, and to graciously avoid muttering "OK, boomer" when he refuses to

Gen Z and Gen Alpha cohorts,

maybe it is time for us millennials

to extend some compassion and

empathy to our fathers as they

admit to his mistakes. Perhaps this Father's Day, it is time to embrace him instead. Because I do know that while I may not be a daddy's girl, for better or worse, I will always be my father's daughter.

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Hear Me Out is a new series where young journalists (over)share on topics ranging from navigating As we become the grumpy elder : friendships to self-loathing, and the

