



Ms Fiona Ke, a senior staff nurse at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, says she gained more empathy for patients after her heart operation. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

GENERATION GRIT

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GenerationGrit

Nurse puts her heart into helping those in need

The poverty she experienced growing up filled Fiona Ke, 32, with compassion for the less fortunate, as did an unexpected heart operation at the age of 22. This is her story in her own words.

Theresa Tan
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"My dad abandoned us when I was around five or six years old and my mum struggled to raise the three of us. I was the youngest.

She also had to support our grandfather, my dad's elderly father, who lived with us. So my mum rented out two rooms in our four-room flat while we squeezed into the master bedroom, and my grandfather slept in the kitchen.

I remember my dad, who was a businessman, fighting with my mum over money. When they quarrelled, he would hit her and, the next day, she would have bruises. I felt threatened all the time. Having to witness domestic violence as a kid was frightening. I felt that I hated my dad. Why did he bring so much misery to us? Why did he not give us a single cent? Why was he violent?

We struggled, financially. Every few months, there would not be enough money to pay the electricity bills and the power supply would suddenly be cut off. We would have to light candles at night and I would study by the window next to the common corridor to catch the light.

To get the electricity back, my

mum would borrow money to pay the bills.

I had a constant feeling of insecurity because our family situation was so unstable. And the tenants were always changing.

My mum babysat in the day before working as a cleaner at night. Sometimes, I had to help her babysit when she had to rush off to work and the baby's parents had not come for their child yet.

Fortunately, we had some help. Touch Community Services tutored me for free and we had financial aid from other groups.

Since when I was in primary school, I've wanted to give my mum a comfortable life so I studied hard. I would also hurry home after school to help her with babysitting or housework.

My brother, who is an engineer, encouraged me to study nursing. He said it's a stable job and I can help others. But my mother was against it. She said nursing was a dirty job as I have to clean other people's backsides.

Still, I decided to become a nurse as I liked the thought of helping other people and I knew I wouldn't be short of a job. Tan Tock Seng Hospital sponsored my diploma in nursing from Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

I am now a senior staff nurse at the hospital.

In my second year of working as a nurse, I started to experience chest discomfort and it felt like my heart was pumping very hard. The doctors found a hole in my heart.

The medicine I was prescribed didn't seem to help so I did something I would never recommend that patients do - I stopped taking it. As a result, I got worse. The hole in my heart grew to between 2.3cm and 3cm.

The doctor advised me to have surgery, but I wasn't keen as I was afraid of dying on the table. There were still so many things I wanted to do, like getting married and travelling the world.

But the doctor said if I did not have the surgery, my condition would worsen and I might have heart failure by the age of 40. So I felt I had no choice but to do it.

It was a good decision. Not only did it cure me, but it allowed me to experience, as a patient, what a dif-

ference we nurses can make with our care.

I also gained more empathy for patients. After my recovery, I tried to be more patient and to understand them, especially when they behaved unreasonably.

(Ms Alyn Lim, a senior nurse manager, described Ms Ke as a dedicated and selfless nurse who works well in a multi-disciplinary team and is happy to offer help in any situation.)

Ms Ke was also one of 10 people who received an Honourable Mention at the Healthcare Humanity Awards, given out in April to salute healthcare professionals who go beyond the call of duty to help others. The Honourable Mention is the awards' highest accolade.)

Growing up, I was angry with my dad, but now I no longer am.

Nursing changed the way I see life. You see many people in worse situations and you realise your problem is nothing compared with theirs.

A patient who is here today may

A heart for helping others



SCAN TO WATCH




<http://str.sg/fionake>

be dead tomorrow. So why make myself unhappy over a person? I have seen a lot of death as a nurse, and the fragility of life.

My dad died about nine years ago. We heard about it from a distant relative, and I felt sad.

After he abandoned us, I still saw him once in a while and I last met him while I was at the polytechnic.

What helps me cope with difficulties in life is to keep telling myself that this will pass - that no matter how difficult it is now, the bad times will pass.

The greatest thing we can do is to help one another.

I wouldn't say I'm a dedicated volunteer but I help whenever I can. For example, I sometimes use my days off work to help out at a mobile clinic for the elderly.

I also volunteer with Happy People Helping People, which gives elderly cardboard collectors free food. Recently, I saw an elderly person fall as she was rushing to get her free meal.

So I raised funds to buy first-aid kits for the cardboard collectors. I also hope to start a mobile clinic for these impoverished seniors.

When I was young, I benefited from the help given to us by various charities. Now that I'm able to do so, I want to give back.

I met my husband, a 29-year-old audiologist, through work. We are in the same department. I was drawn to his caring nature and he treats me very well. Our values are also aligned - we are both giving people and we treasure time with our families.


He suffered hearing loss after a throat infection as a child. He wears a hearing aid.

When I was younger, going to McDonald's for a meal was a luxury. I felt envious when my friends went travelling with their parents. But over time, I realised material things are not that important. You can have a lot of money but still not be truly happy or have a life purpose.

Now, my purpose is to infect others with a spirit of doing something to help others. I may not be able to do a lot but, as long I can help a little, I'm happy."

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