

National Day 2020

ESSENTIAL WORKERS – OUR UNSUNG HEROES

As most of us rest and celebrate, there are those on the front line holding the fort, and who keep Singapore going. Here are their stories.

Stepping up to help at screening centre

Cheryl Tan

When Covid-19 struck, 46-year-old Maryann Sheila – a front-line registration worker at an orthopaedic clinic in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TSSH) – rose to the occasion. She volunteered to switch jobs and register people who had to be

swabbed for Covid-19 at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) screening centre. This meant irregular working hours and more hectic shifts, but Ms Sheila, who took up the stint in February, remained unfazed. "I had the full support of my family to step up and help amid the pandemic, and it was this which kept

me going," says the mother of two sons, aged 23 and 11. "The peak of the outbreak in April sometimes saw over a hundred people in a single day queuing to be registered for their swab tests. "It was important for us to work quickly and efficiently, to register their details and provide them with patient tags before they were

handed over to nurses," says Ms Sheila, whose previous work involved registering patients as a senior patient service associate at TSSH's Orthopaedic Specialist Outpatient Clinic. She joined two years ago. For her efforts on the front line, she will be taking part in the National Day celebrations by attend-

ing the Anthem moment ceremony at TSSH to mark the efforts of healthcare workers. During the ceremony, she will raise the hospital's flag. "Traditionally, I've always spent National Day at home with my family where we watch the parade live together, but this year, I'm honoured to be representing Tan Tock



With the Covid-19 outbreak necessitating health precautions, Mr Koh Kok Weng has been solemnising weddings through video conferencing platform Zoom. He has done 109 online weddings since May. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KOH KOK WENG

Solemnising couples' marriages over Zoom

Since May, 71-year-old Mr Koh Kok Weng has solemnised 109 weddings through video conferencing platform Zoom, amid the health precautions required by Covid-19. Many of these involved couples who had initially scheduled their weddings during that time but agreed to have them online instead. Mr Koh says: "It's heart-warming to see these families united, especially for those who have relatives staying overseas, who would otherwise not have been able to attend a physical wedding. So it's nice to see them all in one Zoom 'room' witnessing a happy occasion."

sollemnised through Zoom, around 10 involved couples with family members staying overseas and were most likely unable to attend a physical wedding if it were held, owing to travel restrictions. On the other advantages of Zoom, he says: "Many of these couples wanted to get married and start a new life together, so they didn't wish to delay their weddings. I'm glad to be part of this important milestone of their journey ahead of them." Despite being a veteran, Mr Koh recognises the importance of continued learning and upskilling, which gave him the foresight to learn the ropes of video-conferencing technology. He was among the first to be trained in conducting video-link solemnisations under the Registry of Marriages, before Covid-19 even reared its head. Since being appointed a solemniser in 1992, Mr Koh has officiated at 1,654 weddings. He also teaches first-aid training at the Singapore Red Cross Academy. He started as a volunteer there in 1989, and ever since he has

been covering national and community events as a first-aid, and also volunteered as an ambulance driver in the early 1990s. But his humanitarian and volunteering work over the decades goes beyond the Red Cross. Mr Koh has been lauded for his community service efforts as a grassroots leader, beginning in 1976. He still continues to volunteer as a grassroots member at the same Jalan Besar Community Club where he started. Over the years, he has been presented with several National Day awards including the Public Service Star in 2007 and the Public Service Medal in 1991 for his grassroots contributions. But this year's National Day has a more exciting slant, as Mr Koh has been invited to attend the Anthem moment ceremony at the Enabling Village, in the spirit of National Day celebrations. Though he was invited as an honorary guest to National Day parades in the past, Mr Koh says he is "humbled and honoured" to take part today. Cheryl Tan



Workforce Singapore senior career ambassador Fauziah Johari has seen more clients in recent months. Apart from assisting in job searches, she also offers advice on upgrading their skills to remain relevant. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Helping others find jobs amid downturn

Prisca Ang

For dedicated career adviser Fauziah Johari, work does not end when a client lands a job. She often checks in with them on how they are coping with work and offers advice on upgrading their skills to remain relevant. Relationship building is important for Ms Fauziah, 35, who has been in this role – officially, a "senior career ambassador" – for three years and who is the first point of contact for job seekers. She works at the Workforce Singapore's (WSG) Careers Connect centre at Our Tampines Hub.

Referring to the pandemic's toll on the labour market, Ms Fauziah, who is married and has three children, says: "It's about putting myself in their shoes. I try to understand their stress and difficulties, especially with the current situation, and to be a listening ear." If clients need more in-depth advice, she refers them to a career coach who can help them in areas such as confidence building and strategies to network with potential employers. The first session with a client usually lasts half an hour, either virtually or in person. Ms Fauziah, who previously held administrative roles at WSG, recalls a recent client who, in her late 60s, found a job as a condominium security officer after she was retrenched from her customer service role. She has kept in touch with the client so she can provide more information on job-related programmes if the client needs it. "She was happy that she found a job near her place. It's very fulfilling to meet people from all walks of life and to be able to make a difference to them." She then recommends resources they can tap to find employment, such as job portals like Mycareersfuture.sg, schemes and courses

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SPECIAL HONOUR

Traditionally, I've always spent National Day at home with my family where we watch the parade live together, but this year, I'm honoured to be representing Tan Tock Seng Hospital.



MS MARYANN SHEILA, a front-line registration worker at an orthopaedic clinic in TSSH who volunteered to switch jobs and register people who had to be swabbed for Covid-19 at the NCID.

Ms Maryann Sheila raising the Tan Tock Seng Hospital flag during a rehearsal on Thursday for the National Day Anthem moment ceremony. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Seng Hospital," says Ms Sheila. On her NCID work, she says that patients would sometimes arrive in a worried or jittery state, and she would step in to reassure them. "Many of the foreign workers are often extremely worried about the communication barriers. I remembered one was very anxious because he was so worried that he

might have contracted the virus and wanted to contact his family," she adds. "In times like these, it's important to calm them down and let them have their moment, because it brings them a great deal of comfort and it can really make a difference." tansuwen@sph.com.sg



Mr Aloysius Lee, who is deaf, has gone from only transporting passengers for Grab to delivering food and parcels as well as being part of the company's GrabCare service ferrying healthcare professionals to and from hospitals. PHOTO: GRAB

Ferrying healthcare staff to and from work

Clement Yong

Mr Aloysius Lee used to only transport passengers for Grab, but with more people staying at home because of the coronavirus, he joined the firm's food and parcel delivery services in April. The 33-year-old is also a driver for GrabCare, a service dedicated to ferrying healthcare professionals to and from hospitals. Congenitally deaf, Mr Lee communicates with passengers by typing on a screen or through simple gestures. This has led to heart-warming moments, such as when he ferried a nurse from near Singapore

General Hospital to Woodlands. "When we reached her destination, her husband came down and gave me a can of orange juice," he recalls. "They thanked me using sign language, and the nurse also lipped 'Have a safe drive!'." "These acts of kindness are not necessary, but (these people) took the extra effort to make me feel appreciated, and made my day." On going into this area of driving, Mr Lee says: "Covid-19 impacted my earnings as my income started falling even before the circuit breaker started. As most people stayed home, driving people alone was no longer sustainable." His decision has put him close to the front line of Singapore's Covid-19 efforts, but he says he is not worried, as the nurses and doctors drive "are professionals and know how to best keep themselves and the people around them safe". As he lives with his elderly parents, aged 61 and 64, Mr Lee makes sure to practise contactless pickup and delivery for food and parcels. He also takes his temperature and regularly sanitises his hands. He says he has received more

tips from passengers during this period, despite the general economic hardship. Grab says the proportion of passengers who tipped tripled between March and April, a trend that has continued into phase two of Singapore's reopening. The average tipping amount has also increased by 5 per cent to 10 per cent. Mr Lee is driving today, as he anticipates higher demand for rides on a public holiday, but says it will not detract from the importance of the day for him. "The National Day Parade definitely helps to strengthen our Singaporean pride. It reminds us of the reason why we need to stay united to overcome this crisis." He hopes things can return to the way they were before Covid-19, but notes that the crisis has altered people's behaviour for the better. "Singaporeans are much more appreciative of the little things now. I know friends who do food deliveries who receive food and drinks from customers. I hope this appreciation for our job continues, even as we go back to normal." clementy@sph.com.sg



Healthcare director Jessie Ho of Integrated Health Information Systems and her team had just four days' notice to create a community isolation facility at the Singapore Expo in April. PHOTO: INTEGRATED HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Creating an isolation facility in four days

Healthcare director Jessie Ho, 54, had just four days' notice to create a community isolation facility at the Singapore Expo. The number of Covid-19 cases had hit 1,000 in Singapore on April 1 and cases in migrant worker dorms were rising. To manage the surge in demand for hospital spaces, the Government decided to convert the Expo into a space for those needing less medical attention. The fast pace of events piled the pressure on Ms Ho – director of the healthcare enablement office of Integrated Health Information Systems (IHS) – and her team to get things under way before patients started streaming in. "We had four

days to institute a new model of care," she says of the facility, which has ended up housing nearly a thousand patients at a time. Ms Ho and her Expo team of about 30 people set up kiosks monitoring patients' vital signs and developed software so they would have patients' details from the hospitals before they arrived. They also created multi-language software for patients and conducted training for clinical teams from different hospitals to standardise procedures. They pulled it off – but after that, she and the team often worked 14- to 16-hour days over a month to refine the set-up. Ms Ho says: "For a whole month we huddled together at night once every two to three days to tweak the system so that we could stabilise and improve the care we were giving to patients." IHS is the technology vendor for Singapore's healthcare sector. It was able to deploy technology such as remote-controlled robots to minimise unnecessary contact between the 15 nurses and eight doctors per shift and the 800 to 900 patients in the Expo halls. But this meant Ms Ho's team had to set up

the technology from scratch at the Expo and teach patients how to use the gadgets. "There was some concern and fear that I would be infected. But we took all necessary precautions and used a lot of hand sanitiser," she says. Her 23-year-old daughter is a nurse at Sengkang General Hospital and both will be at their posts today. Ms Ho has two other daughters, 21 and 25, who will watch the celebrations from home in Yishun. Ms Ho previously worked in the education sector and moved to healthcare four years ago to "contribute in a different way". She is proud of how Singapore's healthcare workers have performed in the pandemic. She will take a short break from work today to receive the salute from the mobile column to essential workers at the Expo. More than 50 IHS employees are working on National Day. "It is due recognition for us," Ms Ho says of the salute. "(It) makes me feel like they mean it when they say they appreciate our sacrifice and the risk we are taking." clementy@sph.com.sg

WRITING NEW CHAPTERS | Insight reconnects with two Singaporeans who spoke to The Sunday Times as part of a National Day special

Family-run Ponggol Seafood keeping afloat

Goh Yan Han

Times are tough amid the Covid-19 pandemic for Ponggol Seafood, a family-run restaurant famous for its chilli crab and mee goreng that has been around since 1969. Mr Ting Cheng Ping, 57, the restaurant's manager and son of its late founder, Mr Ting Choon Teng, describes the last few months as "disastrous". The restaurant at the Punggol Settlement near Punggol Point Jersey has been struggling to break even since March, when the coron-

avirus widened its spread here. When The Sunday Times interviewed Mr Ting back in 2010 for a National Day special, Mr Ting talked about how sad the family was when the restaurant had to leave its original location in Punggol Point, shifting several times before it moved to its new location at that time, Marina Country Club. In 2014, the restaurant returned to Punggol Point, but about 100m from where it first began, Mr Ting recalls now. Yet business was difficult even before Covid-19, as the new malls in the area drew away customers, and

road works in the vicinity resulted in some customers getting lost, adds Mr Ting. One of the biggest changes in the past 10 years is competition not just from seafood restaurant chains like Jumbo and Long Beach, but also from new cuisines, like mala xiang-guo (spicy stir fry). That is why the restaurant has to come up with new ideas, such as re-vamping its menu when needed, says Mr Ting. It recently added tanghoun crab to the menu. Although the coming home of tourists has not been easy, the Tings are not throwing in the towel.



Mr Ting Cheng Ping and his sister, Ms Cecilia Ting, at their family restaurant which is famous for its chilli crab and mee goreng. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

When dining in was not allowed earlier this year, they continued with takeaway and home delivery services – rolled out in 2003 during the severe acute respiratory syn-

drome outbreak. They have offers, like selling smaller crabs at a fixed price, and credit card promotions, says Mr Ting. They also tap new mediums

like Facebook and WhatsApp to promote their offers. These efforts have helped to bring back about 30 per cent of sales, says Mr Ting. Family members chip in as well – most of Mr Ting's siblings, and even his brother-in-law, are at the restaurant on weekends. Ms Cecilia Ting, 61, has been taking orders, acting as cashier, and doing odd jobs in the kitchen since 2014. She sold her shoe business last year and now helps out more regularly. "It's hard to find staff willing to work here, and after all, this is my father's business," says Ms Ting. Mr Ting says he is unsure who would take over the restaurant, but plans to stay on as long as he can. His only son, Fabian, 23, has not expressed an interest. He adds: "Now, we are just focusing on getting through this Covid-19 pandemic. We hope that a vaccine can be found, things go back to normal and we can bounce back." gyanhan@sph.com.sg

in 2010, and finds out how their stories have evolved and how they have reinvented themselves amid the pandemic.

Barber aims to give old shop a cutting edge

As a teenager following around his grandfather – the man who started the Sui Dewana barber shop chain – Mr Muhammad Syuhadak knew this was his calling too. "I loved the feeling in the shop, talking to the barbers and customers. It was like a home away from home," says Mr Syuhadak, 38. After learning the ropes from his grandfather, he managed to find his own space to set up shop in Marine Terrace, where he grew up. When The Sunday Times interviewed Mr Syuhadak in 2010 for a National Day special, the barber had only just started his business,

Nuri Cahaya – which implies in Malay a small bird flying towards the light – for a few years. Ten years later, he has taken his shop to new heights, and given it his own spin. While the seats for the customers are still the old model and he continues to do cuts with scissors – the old-school style, he says – the shop now has wireless clippers, offers trendy gentleman's haircuts and edgy pomades and hairwax on sale. The fusion of the old and the new keeps regulars coming back, while attracting new customers – forming a clientele of all ages and races. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic,

business struggled for a bit, in particular when hairdressers and barber shops were ordered to close for several weeks during the circuit breaker period, says Mr Syuhadak, who got divorced in 2017. But he and his new wife Siti Noorhaliana, 39, and their three teenagers from his wife's previous marriage, managed to tide themselves over thanks to the Covid-19 Support Grant, for which Ms Noorhaliana, who works in retail, was eligible. Ms Noorhaliana recently came on board as co-owner of the shop, to help manage finances and run the shop, while Mr



Mr Muhammad Syuhadak says the fusion of the old and the new helps him form a clientele of all ages and races. PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Syuhadak plans to take a back seat and focus on haircuts. The couple have big plans for the shop's future. They constantly keep up with haircut trends, and have re-

cently begun offering "zero fades" – cutting the sides down to minimal length – and other now-trendy gentleman's haircuts at \$17 for an adult, compared with \$25 to \$45 else-

where, says Mr Syuhadak. "We want it to be affordable because we are in a heartland residential area," says Ms Noorhaliana. This has helped bring in the customers again, after the dip earlier this year. They also plan to revamp the shop this year and give it a new name. "Currently, it means a small bird, so as we have evolved we are thinking it's time to change. My wife suggested the albatross, so we might use that," says Mr Syuhadak. The couple plan to redo the decor of the shop, while retaining the fusion feel, and are looking to expand to another two or three shops. They had originally planned to do so this year before the pandemic hit. In the future, Mr Syuhadak hopes one of their children will take over the shop: "I want to pass it to someone who will take care of clients and the reputation of the shop – that barbers here are friendly and kind." Goh Yan Han