

200 free meals a day and... counting

The Cuff Road Project aims to let migrant workers in trouble eat with dignity

MALAVIKA NATARAJ

WHEN Mr S. Shanmuganathan stepped out of his restaurant in Little India, he used to spot many migrant workers sitting disconsolately on the pavement outside.

Mr Shan, as he is affectionately called by everyone, asked them why they were there... and the answer shocked him. Most of them were penniless and hungry, and in a state of flux due to some issue with their employer.

One of them is construction worker Ramasamy Selvaraj.

He says he was badly injured in January last year by a pump left out carelessly by a co-worker during a night shift at a site here. Claiming that his employers assured him they would take care of things, the man from Pattukotai district in Tamil Nadu said that he has been in continuous pain and needs to have his kneecap replaced.

The medical claim was reportedly filed in March last year, but the case is yet to be settled, according to him.

Mr Selvaraj's situation is not unique. Other workers have hit snags in their career here too and, in some cases, they are repatriated before they lodge a complaint with the Ministry Of Manpower (MOM).

When workers do lodge official complaints with MOM, their work permits are immediately cancelled and special passes are issued, which allows them to stay in Singapore until their cases are resolved. This takes time.

As special pass holders are legally prohibited from working, many end up sleeping on pavements and under shelters, often without food, as they wait for legal clarity.

Mr Shan has teamed up with non-governmental organisation Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and One Singapore (an organisation aimed at alleviating world poverty) to help these people. And since March 2008 they have been providing free meals for these workers at his Sutha's Restaurant in Cuff Road as part of The Cuff Road Project, a joint initiative by TWC2 and One Singapore.

That was around the time a few volunteers spotted groups of men sleeping on pavements in Little India. On closer investigation, it became apparent that the men were all on special passes, with nowhere to stay and hardly any food to eat. And so the project was born.

The aim: To provide good meals in a safe environment, where the men can eat with dignity.

So intent is TWC2 and Mr Shan on providing these workers with some dignity that he even closes his restaurant to



Warm meal, warm hospitality... workers on special passes having a meal at Sutha's Restaurant in Little India (left) while others pick out clothes and magazines from donated items (above). PHOTOS: MALAVIKA NATARAJ

normal customers twice a day. "I'm happy to help them. My other customers know that I do this, and so at certain times of the day, they don't come here," he says.

Other charitable organisations hand out food packets on the street but the workers have found a temporary refuge from their problems inside Sutha's, where they can linger over their meals and enjoy some companionship. This does affect Mr Shan's business but he doesn't mind.

Sutha's serves over 200 such meals daily, with breakfast mainly consisting of two thosais or uttapams, and free flow of coffee or tea. Often, dinner is rice, egg or chicken and a vegetable curry. So far, The Cuff Road Project is surviving on donations alone. A standard meal costs about \$2 except for special days when sponsors step in to pay for \$3 meals.

Since its inception in 2004, TWC2 has been a helpline for many. Taking the cue from its forerunner, The Working Committee 2, its volunteers are committed to the welfare of migrant and transient workers. And it has grown to become a valuable source of information for the authorities, employment agencies as well as the public.

One of the people working very hard on The Cuff Road Project is Ms Asha Nathirmal. And when she presented this story of broke and starving workers to her fellow members at the Inner Wheel Club East, they were shocked.

Fellow volunteer and Inner Wheel Club East member Vinita Wadhvani says: "Many Indians want to give, but they just don't know where or whom to give to. Now, they can give here."

The primary beneficiaries of The Cuff Road Project are Bangladeshi, Indian



I have already suffered for a year. I don't want to give up now.

— Mr Ramasamy Selvaraj (above) who says he will not go home till his medical claim is settled

and Sri Lankan workers. While their individual situations vary, many are injury cases and the higher percentage of these are among the Indian workers. But one thing is common: They need help.

The injured Mr Selvaraj says: "I came here because I wanted to make money for my family, for my two sons. We have nothing else."

Does he feel like giving up, and going home? "I have already suffered for a year. I don't want to give up now," he says.

Another person who claims he suffered an on-site injury is Mr Mohar Ali. The Bangladeshi says his skull was cracked and he had massive head injuries and, although he underwent emergency surgery soon after, no treatment or assessment has been made since.

He claims he requires follow-up surgery to have a part of his skull replaced with a titanium plate, but says his employer will not provide the hospital with a letter of guarantee.

One employer, who did not want to be identified, said that while some of the workers' cases are genuine, many use medical claims as a way to stay longer in the country and get more money. He alleged that injured workers are influenced by their lawyers.

He says: "Actually, the Workman's Compensation (WC) is a straightforward process taken care of by MOM, the employers and their insurance companies. So why do they need lawyers?"

Employers are being criticised even when they are doing what they should, he adds: "For example, there was one situation when the WC amount was mutually agreed on by all parties, including the worker. Then, suddenly, the worker and his lawyer said that they were dropping

the WC and were starting civil proceedings.

"So what is the point of the WC? Who stands to gain from this? I always tell the workers, the lawyers don't work for free."

While the legal aspects are best left to the courts and the authorities, it is undeniable that these workers are fending for themselves. In fact, most of them get by on the goodwill of their friends.

Ms Debbie Fordyce, a key volunteer with TWC2 and the driving force behind The Cuff Road Project, says: "It is just amazing what their friends would do for them."

Construction worker Shyamalan, who has friends on special passes, says: "All of us on work permits do whatever we can to help our friends. Any of us could be in their situation - it's only because of luck that we are not. If I were in their situation, they would surely help me. Here, we are like a family."

The affected workers also appreciate The Cuff Road Project. "At least we have food to eat here, we don't have anything else. We sleep on the street," says one group of Tamil workers.

But TWC2 wants to do more. It says these workers need more than just food and has set up an emergency fund to help with minor medical treatment like an infected tooth or a prescription for glasses at a nearby clinic that charges \$5 per patient. In the past, volunteers have also contributed phone cards to help these men communicate with their families at home.

Mrs Nathirmal says: "What would also be very useful to them are EZ link cards, so they can come and go. So many of them go back and forth from MOM and their lawyers."

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Communicating... the teachers and their students.

Helping workers to integrate

EUGENE LIM

THE skyscrapers that define Singapore's landscape did not materialise at the snap of an architect's fingers. Hundreds of foreign workers have contributed with their sweat and hard labour to see these edifices rise up from the slushy ground. Yet, many among us don't recognise their efforts.

These workers also struggle to communicate well in English, affecting their integration into society. It is also vital for them to have a common language as errors in the construction industry can be disastrous.

It was with this aim that four of us - three students from NUS Business School and one from the engineering course - got together to teach more than 30 foreign construction workers key English words. Our mission was to teach them English through songs and role-playing and hopefully improve their conversation skills.

We have to admit that we are no saints. Having preconceived notions about foreign workers, we went into our first lesson with much apprehension but were pleasantly surprised at their warmth. They were very receptive to our lessons as they recognised the importance of the English language.

Through our interaction, we found that many had wanted to master the language but were unable to find the time or the money to do it.

For the four of us, what had started as module requirements eventually transpired into something larger. Through the eyes of these workers, we saw what we had previously failed to see. Notwithstanding their hapless draw in the roulette wheel of life, they were pretty much like us: Young, ambitious and with a fiery zest to learn new things.

During the five sessions spread over five weeks, we taught them how to speak to bank tellers when they remit money home. They were also taught how to explain to the emergency services personnel if injuries happen at the workplace.

At the end of the sessions, the workers were able to grasp the concepts of the new words and apply them appropriately. We gave them a test and most got 12 out of 15 marks.

Perhaps it may be asking for too much to expect the integration of these people into our society within the span of our generation, but we hope that the toxic foundations of discrimination in our society will be demolished in the near future.

VOLUNTEERS, DONATIONS NEEDED

If you would like to volunteer at TWC2 or make a donation to The Cuff Road Project, call 6247-7001, e-mail centre@twc2.org.sg or log on to www.twc2.org.sg



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