

They are often mere statistics these days – the growing ranks of the elderly, whose care will be borne by ever fewer caregivers. But dive deeper into the people themselves and myriad stories emerge. Dreams, memories, fears, friendship, love, and loss...

In **Who Cares?** photographer Kelvin Lim uses his remarkable visual storytelling abilities to explore the world of these men and women, the limited care options they face as they age, and the larger issue of a greying population.

Alongside the photographs, this volume documents the responses of viewers from all walks of life. Their reflections offer us a personal look at mortality, duty and the future of growing old in Singapore.

Kelvin Lim, a commercial photographer, won the Best Portrait Photography award (*Singapore Tatler*) in 2016. He has exhibited solo at *Portraits of Love* by the Home Nursing Foundation. Kelvin is a consummate storyteller who uses photography, writing and art to reveal his subjects' inner beauty. "It doesn't matter if we're pretty or ugly, rich or poor, famous or misunderstood. Beneath what everyone sees on the outside, there is something within us that is human and real. Everyone is beautiful in their own way, and everyone has a story to tell. This is the inspiration behind my work."

The keynote essay is written by **Radha Basu**, Director of Research at Lien Foundation. Prior to that, she covered ageing and other social issues for more than a decade as a journalist with the *Straits Times*.

Exactly Foundation is a not-for-profit, trademarked registered label established by Li Li Chung to commission photographers to create works that stimulate discussion of social concerns in Singapore. Its goal is to produce new knowledge by having viewers engage with the photographs and share them with friends and family over a 2–3-month period.

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WHO CARES?

Thoughts about Caring for the Elderly in Singapore
Photographs by Kelvin Lim

EDITED BY Li Li Chung
WITH AN ESSAY BY Radha Basu

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Word from the 'Wart'¹

Li Li Chung

www.exactlyfoundation.com

It's easy to say we have an ageing population, but what about it? I knew I had found the right photographer to do this project on caring for the elderly when Kelvin Lim said early on to me that there are more stories – some not so pleasant – behind those photos of happy faces that many like to take of the elderly. Even hugs between the social worker or family members and the elderly start to look staged. So how do we “see” and figure out questions to ask about caring for the elderly? That is the crux of this wonderful Exactly residency, *Who Cares?* by Kelvin Lim. Kelvin loves chatting with the people, young and old, whom he makes portrait photographs of. In this residency, he expanded on some of his early works and in-depth stories by further portraying the many facets and challenges of ageing and the multitude of care options required.

I would like to thank all involved in *Who Cares?* – the many viewers and fellow photographers who actively participated. Special thanks also go to Radha Basu for her insightful essay, “Understanding the Silent Silver Surge”; to Objectifs for helping to stage the exhibition and book launch; and to Jan Chen for this book's design and layout.

From “my bed” to a hospital bed – that more or less sums up the choices of the Singapore elderly. Either you live at home or you go into a ward.

But aren't there – shouldn't there be – more choices in-between one's capacity to manage oneself in one's own home (or in a relative's home) and a big ward-like room shared with many others (who most likely are strangers and have the same need for institutional care)?

Singapore nursing homes have bad PR. We think of them like dog shelters... inhumane, not clean, bad food, overworked staff... for the homeless... the last resort of un-filial children.

I'm not talking about the elderly who are poor, disabled or the “vulnerable adults”. I'm talking about us, the masses – the average Singaporean elderly, poor or rich, aged 55 and older. What about the HDB residents who don't make the “assistance” cutoffs? What about those in private housing? Aren't we citizens, too? If there are alternative options, what are they?

I'm talking about the years of any elderly person's life, aged 55 and beyond. The years between one's own bed at home and the hospital bed.

What do we *really* understand about ageing? My mother is 97 and has been in a Taipei nursing home since her mid-70s when dementia started showing up. All her three children live abroad; her husband passed on long ago. In her 20 years of living with dementia, I have seen her condition change over time, and each step of the way, her care needs are slightly different. One constant: caring for the elderly with dementia takes a huge amount of patience and sensitivity. Now that she's immobile, a huge amount of physical strength is required to lift her to/from bed and wheelchair. She's now like a newborn: barely a sound, five cans of liquid food, ten diapers a day... sleep, sit, shit. She wasn't like that in her 70s.

Much as I want to, I'm not capable of being my mother's caregiver. If my mother were living in Singapore, the government and society here would say I should stay home and take care of her. If I can't? “Hire a maid.” Any ole maid, the same category of foreign domestic worker (FDW) labeled as “unskilled labour” who cleans our homes. Basically any warm body who can feed porridge. Why is it like that? Because a caregiver for the elderly in Singapore is still not considered a respected occupation. It's not even a separate foreign labour category. Don't we need to be mindful of “para-nursing” qualifications? She needs to read English medicine labels, no?

What's her career path? All employers can do is rely on wits and common sense in the hiring process. (My mother's caregiver in Taipei is certified – licensed like an insurance agent.)

Why are we like this in Singapore? Because to have a choice of elderly care options, one must get the thinking right. And broad. We must also have infrastructure (in 2013 we had “more than 99,000 childcare places ... compared to around 3,000 for day-care services for the elderly”²). The second is operating principles (the key word is *principles*): one size cannot fit all. Thirdly, people. The *right* people, qualified people, professionals, not volunteers, i.e. no more over-relying on family members (a topic did not escape an observant visitor³). This is much more serious than being neighbourly.

² “Singapore's caregiver crunch”, *The Straits Times*, 27th September 2013.

³ As noted by Rosa Kornfeld-Matte (UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons) in a 29th September 2016 press conference after her week-long visit to Singapore. “In the area of healthcare and caregiving, she noted that there are many volunteers involved in supporting the elderly. However, she added that caregiving should not be wholly dependent on volunteers and the state should be the main entity in the provision of care. On a similar note, she agreed that the family plays an important role in caregiving, but again stressed that the state must be present to support the family.” Chong Ning Qian, AWARE Research Executive. *UN Expert to Singapore: offer more state support for eldercare, pension for all, minimum wage, poverty statistics*, 3rd October 2016.

¹ 'Wart is short for Stalwart – Exactly Foundation's Stalwart – which Exactly's first resident artist Kevin WY Lee suggested that I write as.

Understanding the Silent Silver Surge

Radha Basu

It is also not just about funding or resources. There is a myriad of good-intentioned public and private organizations all participating in making life better for the ageing. The Ministry of Health in 2016 published its “action plan” for “successful ageing”, *I Feel Young in My Singapore!*⁴ One key assumption was revealed in Chapter 4: “Singapore must be a cohesive community where seniors can age actively and happily.” Yes, all well and good, but *how* and *till when*? Who’s the on-site, the reliable and the personal caregiver?

Are we spending tax money, time and effort in the right places? By 2030, it is estimated that

Singapore will have 1 in 4 people who are elderly, and many will be living alone and female. Do I, as one in the post-55 group, only need visits from social workers, a really jazzy exercise programme, opportunities to meet new friends while planting home-grown vegetables? While I can still make my own decisions, don’t I need a plan for where and how I would like to live as I age beyond my own capabilities to be independent? With advisers everywhere offering retirement planning (wealth management, insurance), where are the advisers on aged care?

Where else can I live? And how?

On the face of it, they resemble a fast-disappearing relic from Singapore’s past – three generations of a family living under the same roof. An elderly couple – let’s call them the Tans – share their home with their only son, his wife and children. You would think they live in happiness, bound by an unspoken bond of love and mutual care. The filial son and his wife look after the ageing parents, who, in turn, help care for their pre-teen grandchildren.

But peer closer at the visual essay crafted by photographer Kelvin Lim and the warts are all too obvious. The Tans share a home, but little else, the fabric of their family torn apart by friction and feuds. The older couple don’t get along with their daughter-in-law. She, in turn, refuses to cook for them. So while she makes home-cooked meals for her husband and children, the older couple have to buy their meals from the hawker centre downstairs. Another photo, *Bright Lights*, depicts the older Tans’ sad charade for the camera. They wear bright clothes. They want to appear happy, yet the big smiles and bright lights can’t mask their pain. Mrs Tan’s smile does not extend to her eyes, her husband’s eyes are tightly shut. You wouldn’t know from the photograph, but he can hardly see.

Confucian ideals

Singapore is among the most rapidly ageing countries in the world, with the numbers of older

people set to double to nearly one million by 2030. In 2010, one in 10 Singaporeans was aged 65 or older. That figure has since grown to one in eight. By 2020, one in six will have joined the growing ranks of grey.¹ And by 2030, Singapore will long have been a “super-aged society” like Japan, with one in four a senior citizen. This tripling of elderly numbers in Singapore is expected to occur in under 20 years – by contrast, this change took nearly a century in Europe.

In Singapore, the social and policy assumption has long been that the family is the first line of support in meeting eldercare needs. In the past decades, buoyed by the baby boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the vast majority of elderly had many children to share the burden of caregiving as they aged. It wasn’t uncommon for seven or eight siblings to share the caregiving chores and costs. But thanks to a superbly effective family planning programme in the decade after Singapore’s independence, our total fertility rates fell rapidly from 4.7 births per woman in 1965 to 2.0 by 1975.² In short, baby-boomers were part of large families, but then most went on to have few children.

⁴ https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/dam/moh_web/SuccessfulAgeing-WCMS/action-plan.pdf

¹ Population.sg Team, National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister’s Office (22 August 2016), *Older Singaporeans to Double by 2030*. Retrieved from <https://www.population.sg/articles/older-singaporeans-to-double-by-2030>

² Koh, E.C. (January 2010), “Phases of Singapore’s Demographic Development Post World War II”, *Ethos* (7).

Like other East Asian nations, Singapore has had below-replacement-level fertility rates for more than 40 years, which means that some of the oldest members of this stop-at-two generation are already in their 40s. Their parents are in their 60s and 70s or older; many already need care, and the numbers of elderly will explode over the next decade.

In many Asian countries, including Singapore, the elderly either share a home with, or live near, their children. But due to the shrinking of family size, rising rates of singlehood and a desire for independence, increasing numbers of older folks live on their own. The number of Singapore citizens aged 65 and above who live alone – a powerful proxy indicator of people who could need institutional care at some point – is expected to more than double from 41,000 in 2015 to 58,000 in 2020 and 92,000 by 2030.³

While Singaporeans will continue to live longer, they may not necessarily live well. Recent studies led by Professor David Matchar and Associate Professor Angelique Chan from the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School warn that older folks will not necessarily be independent as they age. The researchers found that after accounting for educational composition, functional disability rates in people aged 80 and above will increase from 40.8% in 2000 to 64.4% by 2040.⁴ Another paper, also by Matchar and Chan, predicted that

the number of elderly Singaporeans who cannot perform one or more “activities of daily living” (ADLs) on their own will increase from around 32,000 in 2010 to 83,000 by 2030.⁵

Caregiver crunch

Early signs of Singapore’s caregiving crunch came in the first in-depth study on the issue, done by researchers from the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, which was released in 2013. Associate Professor Angelique Chan and her team interviewed more than 1,200 pairs of family caregivers and care recipients. The results are worrying. Around half the respondent caregivers had jobs; yet they spent 38 hours every week on caregiving chores, which was almost

³ Singapore, National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister’s Office (November 2012), “Projection of Foreign Manpower Demand for Healthcare Sector, Construction Workers and Foreign Domestic Workers”. Retrieved from [http://www.nptd.gov.sg/portals/0/news/OPProjection of foreign manpower demand for healthcare sector construction workers and foreign domestic workers.pdf](http://www.nptd.gov.sg/portals/0/news/OPProjection%20of%20foreign%20manpower%20demand%20for%20healthcare%20sector%20construction%20workers%20and%20foreign%20domestic%20workers.pdf)

⁴ Ansah, J. P., Malhotra, R., Lew, N., Chiu, C., Chan, A., Bayer, S., & Matchar, D. B. (2015), “Projection of Young-Old and Old-Old with Functional Disability: Does Accounting for the Changing Educational Composition of the Elderly Population Make a Difference?” *PLOS ONE*, 10(5). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0126471

⁵ Thompson, J. et al. (January 2014), “Projecting the number of older Singaporeans with activity of daily living limitations requiring human assistance through 2030”. *Annals, Academy of Medicine Singapore*, 43(1), 51-56.

like having a second job. Only half employed a domestic worker.

I visited more than 20 families looking after frail, elderly loved ones at home while investigating the effects of Singapore’s silver surge as a journalist with *The Straits Times* in 2013. The stories reflected love, grit, grace and sacrifice – and in almost every home, I met caregivers reduced to tears while narrating their life stories. Some were torn between love and filial duty on one side and the need to earn a living on the other. Many sacrificed their jobs – or took lesser-paying ones – endangering their own retirement adequacy in favour of providing a beloved parent some comfort in his or her last leg of life.

Take, for instance, the divorced single mother who quit a well-paying job and started her own business to gain a flexible work schedule to allow her to look after her frail parents, while juggling child-rearing chores and work. Her 15-year-old son would look after her parents when she was away on work.

Then there was the single mother who had to quit her work when her mother – the sole caregiver to her infant daughter – suffered a stroke herself. Caregiver became care recipient overnight.

Some, like a 57-year-old hospital administrative assistant, soldiered on, juggling work, housework

and caring for not one but two sick family members. She slept only four or five hours every night. The sheer physical exhaustion reduced her to a shadow of her former self – when I met her, she weighed only 38 kg.

Yet others, like an 84-year-old retired cleaner, who looked after his blind daughter and bed-ridden wife, were caregivers, despite being old themselves.

Plan B on foreign domestic workers

In Singapore, there are two main avenues of paid help for eldercare. Thousands of frail older folks are being looked after at home by paid foreign domestic workers. Understandably – and this is supported by countless surveys – the vast majority of the elderly would like to live and die at home but doing so with high care needs is a luxury, especially in economically advanced countries that do not have an affordable supply of skilled paid caregivers.

Singapore has indeed been lucky in this respect to have an army of dedicated, caring and hard-working women (all mostly from poorer neighbouring countries) who are willing and able to fulfil vital caregiving roles.

My personal favourite in Kelvin Lim’s moving photo essay is *My Daughter*, which tells the story of a bedridden woman with dementia left in the

sole care of a domestic worker. These foreign domestic workers who leave their own homes just so they can get a much-needed job and send home money, often tirelessly and single-handedly care for their older charges. Some, like this foreign domestic worker in the photograph, become “surrogate daughters”. It made me wonder what the older woman thinks of this arrangement? She herself has a daughter who lives nearby but rarely visits; in fact, the daughter’s flat is visible from the mother’s bedroom. And the domestic worker – what is she doing on her tablet? Reconnecting with her family? Could she – should she – do this in her own room? Does she even have a room? (She doesn’t.) How long can she stay to work in Singapore?

This is a glimpse of tomorrow today, with the number of elderly who live alone set to soar.

This arrangement has also proved to be cost-effective for the government, which has not had to invest in relatively inexpensive professional long-term care facilities. But this luck may run out in the years to come.

There are many reasons why we need a Plan B for foreign domestic workers.

First, the number of older folks in Singapore is set to double to nearly a million by 2030. Second, the number of women who would like to work as

foreign domestic helpers is declining in source countries like the Philippines and Indonesia. A decade or two ago, even degree-holders in those countries would find working as domestic helpers in Singapore a lucrative proposition. But of late, many other opportunities are opening up for these women. They can find jobs as retail assistants, in restaurants on cruise ships, and so forth, all of which offer better pay and regulated work hours. Most importantly, they can also find work as caregivers in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, where, unlike in Singapore, such service staff are covered by labour laws which regulate work hours and stipulate a minimum wage. Crucially, these countries also allow foreign workers to eventually bring their children and immediate family in and apply for citizenship. Since many are young mothers, these countries thus hold infinite more promise for them than Singapore.

Increasingly, recruiters here say they have to search in remote rural areas in the Philippines and Indonesia to find workers who are eager to work in Singapore. But many of these women are not only generally less educated, they are also totally unfamiliar with life in a big city. Myanmar has in recent years emerged as another major source country for domestic workers, but there are already rumbles of fear that improving economic conditions there, too, could lead to a dwindling supply.

To make matters worse, domestic workers are sometimes required to care for critically ill folks who require nursing care, which they are totally untrained for. There have been reported cases recently of caregivers being unfairly burdened with duties beyond their abilities.⁶

While investigating the state of nursing homes for a report commissioned by the Lien Foundation last year, I came across an octogenarian with severe dementia who was admitted to a private nursing home after a frustrated domestic worker stabbed her in the hand. The woman had changed caregivers six times in less than two years. In another case, a worker stabbed a woman with dementia to death, reportedly being unable to cope with the stresses of the job. It goes without saying that dementia can be challenging for caregivers to manage, even with training.

One-on-one care not always the best or only option

Finally – and possibly most importantly – there are some disadvantages to the one-on-one care provided by domestic workers.

First, it can be expensive, especially for those who live in one or two-person households.

Second, many older people who have never employed domestic workers before may be uncomfortable with having a much younger

stranger from a different country and culture living with them and tending to some very private tasks.

Third, doctors here have warned against the negative effects of one-on-one care. Lying down and being served all the time may result in loss of muscle mass and eventually hasten a deterioration in health, even for those old folks who are in relatively good health.

Finally, one-on-one care, especially for people who live alone, is also seen to be a waste of precious resources in a care industry starved of manpower.

Care in the community

In recent years, the government has made a big effort to shore up care in the community. There are currently around 10,400 places for home- and centre-based care available for the elderly, which will grow to around 16,200 places by 2020.⁷ The government is also building “Active Ageing Hubs” in HDB estates to provide exercise and interest-based programmes for active and ambulant seniors. They will also provide

⁶ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/maid-pleads-guilty-to-ill-treating-bedridden-boy?login=true>

⁷ http://www.straitstimes.com/sites/default/files/attachments/2016/11/06/st_20161106_jtold06_2720045.pdf

day-care, rehabilitation and assisted-living services (such as housekeeping and grocery shopping) for frail older folk living in the community.

At the same time, Singapore has been rapidly scaling up the number of nursing home beds to cater to the ageing population. There were more than 12,800 nursing home beds here at end 2016⁸, up from 9,200 in 2010.⁹

A dozen new nursing homes have been built recently, including at least five in 2015. Another eight are being built. But add all this up, and the numbers may still not be adequate, given that there already are more than 176,000 residents aged 75 and above, the group most likely to need care.

As I stated in the Lien Foundation report on nursing homes, titled *Safe but Soulless*, Singapore is fast increasing the number of nursing homes at a time when many other advanced countries are moving away from what is referred to as the “medicalised” model for residential aged care: uniform-clad residents and dismal, dreary dormitory-style beds that have the clinical, colourless look and feel of hospital wards.

Although national data on this is not publicly available, anecdotal evidence from operators show that many people are in nursing homes today not because they have heavy medical or

nursing needs, *but because there is no one to care for them at home*. The nursing home arrangement can be dismal, especially if a cognitively-sound resident lives there for years, with little more than a bed, a cabinet and a toothbrush to call his own. In fact, one study of six homes¹⁰ showed that 15% of residents lived at the nursing homes for a decade or more.

The longest-staying resident in the nursing homes I interviewed had stayed in a nursing home for 27 years. By contrast, the average length of stay for patients aged 65 and above in public hospitals was 8.2 days.¹¹ Small wonder then that many feel that committing medically stable folks into nursing homes risks robbing their lives of meaning and purpose, especially since, unlike in short-stay hospitals, nursing home residents can stay for years, even decades.

⁸ https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/statistics/Health_Facts_Singapore/Health_Facilities.html

⁹ http://www.lienfoundation.org/sites/default/files/SafebutSoulless_0.pdf

¹⁰ Thompson, J., Malhotra, R., Love, S., Ostbye, T., Chan, A., & Matchar, D. (January 2014), “Projecting the number of older Singaporeans with activity of daily living limitations requiring human assistance through 2030”. *Annals, Academy of Medicine Singapore*, 43(1), 51-56.

¹¹ https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/Parliamentary_QA/2014/bed-crunch.html

Significantly, rather than building more nursing homes, Europe, Australia and the U.S. have moved into developing assisted-living or continuing-care communities, where older folk can receive care, but retain some independence in smaller home-like facilities.

Such facilities are virtually non-existent in Singapore today. This, I believe, is the biggest gap in our long-term elderly care infrastructure.

Another key challenge is how to attract and retain staff in nursing homes. Up to 85% of staff are foreigners, largely because at the current salary scales few Singaporeans are willing to do the job. The starting salary for healthcare attendants in nursing homes can be as low as S\$400 per month, excluding food and accommodation. That’s less than what many domestic workers are paid these days. While efforts are on to shore up pay, the starting pay for the vast majority of these workers remains far lower than what they could command in other advanced countries competing for the same pool of foreign care workers.

For instance, the median annual pay of aged care workers in Australia is about A\$41,000¹², well above the minimum wage there and more than four times what some nursing home healthcare attendants make here.

Conclusion

Unlike in most advanced nations, much of the planning and initiatives to cater to the growing needs of Singapore’s ageing population have come from the government. The private sector has played a limited role so far. Yet the demographic challenges of looking after the generation that built this modern metropolis cannot and should not be relegated to the government alone. Private organisations, entrepreneurs and private citizens should step up to contribute ideas, volunteer time and even implement projects. The government, for its part, should reward innovation and enterprise, rather than limit it with too much regulation. Longevity need not be a burden, but a gift. What we need is a collective effort to craft positive change.

¹² http://www.lienfoundation.org/sites/default/files/SafebutSoulless_0.pdf

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Kelvin Lim, 12th November 2016

Who are the real caregivers for our seniors?

In Singapore, it is widely assumed that the young and “the community” should take care of the old. Even our social welfare policies are shaped by these assumptions. Singaporeans receive generous government subsidies for living near, or with, their parents, or incentives such as priority queueing for HDBs. Time and again, we hear of surveys finding that most seniors want to live in their own homes. We see childcare centres being built near senior activity centres and nursing homes, included within HDB estates, all to ensure that Singaporeans can provide better care for their ageing parents while raising their families.

Are these really the best options for the elderly – bringing the young and old together, expecting the young to be the main caregivers? What if the senior doesn't have any children?

One story I found. An elderly couple lives together with their son, his beautiful wife and two little children. On the surface, they are Singapore's model family of three generations under one roof. The reality, however, is a heart-wrenching story of a deeply divided family bound by duty and hatred.

While there are seniors who are dearly loved and cared for by their children or family members, many working adults are simply too busy to provide proper care for their ageing parents. To solve this problem, many Singaporeans hire foreign domestic workers (FDWs) – often just called “maids” – as caregivers for the elderly.

However, in Singapore, FDWs are neither recognized nor trained as professional caregivers. To date, there is no official plan (that I know of) to professionalize the job of caregiving by FDWs.

Without proper care by family members or FDWs, who is to take care of the elderly? What options do they have, besides going to a nursing home?

Another story. In a quiet corner of Waterloo Centre – in the heart of Singapore's commercial district – 12 elderly folks live seemingly peacefully in a shelter run by a Catholic church. They are poor, homeless, and have no family support, but they are able-bodied and independent. The shelter provides basic needs for them – private bedrooms, shared bathrooms, a pantry, a common area with TV – and a small allowance to buy food for themselves. Besides a

mandatory 30-minute morning exercise routine every weekday, and a weekly visit by a qualified doctor, the residents are left to themselves.

These 12 people are among the happiest seniors I've met. Despite surviving only on basics, they have enough to eat, are free to do anything and go anywhere. They have friends around them all the time – not young volunteers and social workers, but fellow seniors they can relate to.

This isn't a nursing home environment, where six to nine patients share a ward, sleep in hospital beds, get fed regimented meals cooked for hundreds of “patients” en masse, and are confined in a walled community controlled by nurses.

Why aren't there more options for our seniors to age with dignity?

“Despite the years of discussion, long-term private and public residential care options for the elderly are limited. For many frail elderly people who live with family without the necessary time or nursing expertise, or for those living alone who are unable to hire a full-time helper, nursing homes remain their main option.”¹

As Singapore continues to advance as a first-world nation, there remains a gap between our “modern world” and the ageing population. A void persists between a generation driven by statistics and a community of seniors and seniors-to-be who need – and want – to be understood. What we understand now may not be relevant in 2030, when our land will be swarmed by almost a million elderly people who need our care. We must plan for a future generation of seniors with very different needs: seniors with different dreams, seniors connected to a virtual global community, seniors who value the power of choice.

I am innately driven to understand people. I treasure every conversation with the elderly because their experiences are so rich with history, knowledge and wisdom. When Home Nursing Foundation (HNF)² called me last year to photograph their elderly patients – a project named *Portraits of Love* – I was elated. This was a great opportunity to empathise with and learn from our seniors.

¹ “Growing old: Should you be worried?” by Janice Tai, *The Straits Times*, November 5, 2016.

² A non-profit organisation that provides home nursing and medical care for home-bound patients.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

In time, *Portraits of Love* morphed into a large-scale project to publicise HNF's services. This was wonderful for the ageing community as HNF has improved the lives of many seniors. However, this also meant that we could only publish photographs and stories which fit the project's purpose – happy seniors.

I wished I could have done more. Many seniors wanted to be heard and understood. How can we understand and help them if we only hear a select part of their stories?

For this reason, I am extremely grateful to be working with Exactly Foundation on *Who Cares?* Instead of stifling creativity and free

expression, the residency encouraged me to dive deeper into the seniors' stories, resulting in a much more profound understanding of their needs.

The most important experience in this project, for me, is stepping out from the emotional depths of the elderlies' stories and asking pragmatic questions on what elder-care really means. It is through this experience that I feel empowered to engage in effective conversations, ask good questions and discuss solutions for our seniors.

When our time comes, can we all age with dignity and grace? And how?

For Review only



#1: Bright Lights

© Kelvin Lim at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2016



#2: Reality

© Kelvin Lim at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2016

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#11: Family Portrait

© Kelvin Lim at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2016



#12: More than a maid

© Kelvin Lim at Exactly Foundation Residency, August 2016

Joanna Loy

Programme Coordinator, Alzheimer's Disease Association

First 24-hour Response

After I heard Kelvin share the stories of the three families last night, I wished I could immediately take some action to help the first elderly couple's problem.

It was a heartbreak for me when I saw the grandchildren's graffiti on the living room wall. The couple worked very hard to build their lovely home; because of the grandchildren's mischief, it has destroyed the home. I guess their son and daughter-in-law did not think this was serious enough to look into. I believe the elderly couple is feeling helpless that they cannot protect their belongings.

Now the couple's son has his new house and invited the elderly parents to live with his family. The purpose of doing so is to have his parents look after his children when he and his wife are at work. The elderly parents are reluctant to move to the son's house, because they fear they will not be used to the new environment. On top of that, the new house does not belong to them, and they may become second-class residents in that household.

I worry that the elderly couple's property will be sold after they join the son's family and the money may be taken away by their only child. If this scenario happens, there's the possibility that the elderly couple may be asked to leave the house and become homeless, if they have an unfilial son.

Our government can take legal action to protect the elderly from being financially or otherwise abused. However, it is rare to see social service workers willing to help the elderly who face abuse. Of course, we also come across some elderly who find it troublesome to go through legal action or who do not want to make the relationship worse with their children.

As a social service worker, I guess we lack certain authority to assist the elderly to fight for their rights.

Can our government do something to let social workers act as social enforcement personnel to help the elderly?

Family/Friends' responses

Hsiu Li

Art Therapist, Alzheimer's Disease Association

I did not attend the dinner or tea sessions. But from what Joanne and Kelvin shared with me, I am touched by the stories.

Through my work, I know a couple of seniors or persons with dementia in their 40s-50s who have limited care services.

For example, there is one gentleman in his 50s who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His case surfaced through AIC (Agency for Integrated Care). Though he attends our day-care services, and we have Home-Based Intervention Care to assess his situation, I am concerned whether his personal hygiene and meals are well taken care of. I'm thankful that

he has a group of church friends who take turns to visit him.

Ageing in Singapore may not be cosy and hassle-free. Everyone needs to prepare well for their old age rather than depend on the government alone.

There are limitations to what any VWO (Volunteer Welfare Organization) can do in reaching out to and caring for the elderly in Singapore. I believe it should start off in each constituency and the MP can pilot programmes for neighbours to keep a lookout for each other.

Personally, I think our VWOs and senior care centres have tried their best. But we can all come together to do more for the elderly with the support of the government.

Violeta Navarro

Single Parent, Foreign Domestic Worker

First 24-hour Response

Our parents took care of us when we were little. They gave up a lot for us. I agree when they get older, we should do the same, be able to take care of them and spend time with them. Because when they are gone, it will be too late for us to realize what we are supposed to do or give back to them.

Thus, I believe we should respect the elderly and care for them in the latter half of their lives with the level of love they gave to us.

Taking care of the elderly requires a lot of patience, as well as attention to their feelings. Exactly like what they did for us. This should be understood by the next generation. To care for those who once cared for us is one of the highest honours. Love our parents, respect them.

Final Response

Mid-January 2017

Sometimes I worry about my future. I feel guilty, too, for not taking care of my mother, as I've been away from my family for a long time, about 24 years now. I left my younger sister, who has her own family too, to take care of my mother.

Now that I'm getting old, I realize it comes with a lot of difficulties, a lot of pros and cons.

I've been thinking a lot on how to prepare for my old age. And not to have overly high hopes that my children will always be there with me when the time comes.

But for now, I'm letting them see how my mother is experiencing dementia, so that they can learn and prepare for when I myself get into that situation.

In the Philippines, my country, nursing homes are not very popular or available at all. So, elders have no choice but to live with siblings or on their own.

Karen and KC Soh

First 24-hour Response

Kelvin's photo journal has shone light onto many a human predicament – the suffering that, by and large, we all have to encounter in life. In the course of helping ourselves and others, we have to remember that we all have an innate tendency to blame others for our losses – be it the loss of a dream, time past, or a loved one. Because without the blame, we are only left with loss.

In the minute time that we have spent with living beings big and small, old and young, human and other creatures, we have found that it is important to remember this – that we are not here to take on or solve their problems and conundrums, but to spare a moment to offer a kind word, a warm heart and the compassion to recognize ourselves in others. Seeing at heart we are all the same, the key to inner peace is in the personal aspiration to cultivate patience and the equanimity to accept all that comes.

Happy Christmas and may we spend the time in reflection and gratitude as we close the year, and remember with hope and kindness the ones who have no one.

Final Response

2nd February 2017

I would like to take the opportunity to expand on this.

Growing up, life was not terribly grand. Simple pleasures of makeshift toys from mum's kitchen castoffs filled the days with endless imagination and joy. Then one day, we were invited to my uncle's home and my world changed. My cousins had proper Barbie dolls complete with a mind-boggling array of clothes and even a house. I came home and looked at my Milo and Cadbury chocolate tins with disgust. These are not toys, I scoffed. I now wanted real toys, and only then would I be happy.

Perspective, they say, is everything. Different vantage points offer different perspectives. Different vantage points also colour individual emotional responses. So technically, you and I can be looking at the same thing, from the very same spot, and have two very different responses. Then if I go away and come again another time, and stand in the same spot, would my response be the same?

For Review only



We live in a society that favours the young; capitalist economies are catered to the young and at least in my own lived experience, no one really wants to talk about ageing or the old. Or it is just an afterthought. But we are all ageing, our parents are ageing and eventually we will all become old and pass on.

Kelvin's project is a good reflection of how lived realities are very different from what the Singapore government "expects" from its citizens: children and families taking care of their aged parents as the first level of social safety net before the state or its related agencies "step in" if things get really bad, i.e. children abandoning their aged parents, old people ending up on the streets, etc.

Stories from Kelvin's series of photos made me wonder: What is "home"? Is it a physical space or is it a social space? When we say we "miss" someone, what do we mean? Do we miss the person himself/herself or do we miss the character, chemistry and interactions with that person? Who is "family"? What is "family"?

The peer dialogue also made me think about how I interact with my grandparents – how do I relate to them? When I grow old, how will younger family members relate to me? Back to the title *Who Cares?* The photographs I selected represent how Kelvin and his wife care for societal issues like ageing and perhaps give more thought and consideration about what it really means to age with dignity. I think we can do a lot more in terms of how we treat the aged and also be inclusive of them – after all, they have much to offer to society. We need to look beyond the "economic contribution" narrative that is regularly cited.

I don't mind growing old, most of the time. But then I'm told I'm not that old, and I certainly don't feel my age. Do I feel older? Or younger? Depends on my mood...

Reflecting on ageing, my own, my family's, my friends'. What is important as you reach old age? Health, finances. Yes, definitely. What else. Care, friendship. Place. Time. The same things that concern us all at any time of life.

My grandparents aged beyond recognition. At the very end of their lives they became strangers. They seemed so far away. I thought of sharing photos of them here, but I changed my mind. My children ask me to tell them the stories my grandparents told me. Sometimes I realise with horror I cannot remember what they said.

I photograph in the street. It's a habit. I see strangers in the street every day, and wonder who they are. What stories they have that will be forgotten. Who cares for them. Sometimes I find out.

I prefer to share the photos of people I have no knowledge of, rather than photos of those I used to know.

