



SAACConnect

Walk of a Lifetime: Over 1,000 Turned Up To Show Support For People With Autism

The journey for persons with autism may not be easy, but it is one that can be done with the support from fellow Singaporeans.

At our inaugural Walk of a Lifetime on 14 October, Dr. Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs, describes the event as "a symbol of solidarity and support for the journey that persons with autism and their families have to walk through."

Walk of a Lifetime featured a 5km walk that flagged off at 4pm from St. Andrew's Junior College, but most of the over-1,000 crowd arrived as early as 2pm. There were also performances by SAJC Concert Band, Temasek Polytechnic Percussion Band, and Albirex Singapore Cheer Dance School; a zumba workout by Irene Fine Fitness; and a rugby friendly match by SAJC Alumni.

Participants and their supporters packed the fringe activity booths, snapping up coupons to redeem snacks, face painting, and massages. Many also popped in at our educational booths, where SAAC's tireless volunteers shared information about autism through activities such as Empathy Game and Snakes & Ladders.

Walk of a Lifetime was envisioned by SAAC staff but realised with support from nearly 100 volunteers. Besides regular SAAC volunteers, others from Team Nila, Maybank, Parkway Radiology, and SAJC chipped in too.

"You are not just another participant in the Walk of a Lifetime; you are THE participant of the Walk of a Lifetime. As you walk, you hold the hand of a child with autism who's walking along with you," said volunteer Mr. Anthony Lai.

Walk of a Lifetime raised \$500,000, which will fund programmes and services at our day activity centres and residential home. It contributes to SAAC's vision to support people with moderate to severe autism, and to enable them to lead dignified and meaningful lives.



Among our most generous sponsors was Bo Rui Foundation (managed by Community Foundation of Singapore), which gave \$50,000. Its spokesperson shared: "It's our honour to donate to SAAC's Walk of a Lifetime; the event combines a healthy aspect for donors to walk alongside persons with autism and also uplifts SAAC's programmes and services simultaneously."



MEET PION SUPERH

SAAC's 18th-anniversary party may have e
enrich the lives of people with autism conti
team share reflection

Siti Nor Aisyah Binte Sarip Lead Teacher, SAAS

Siti Nor Aisyah Binte Sarip, who joined SAAC in 2005 as a teacher/therapist, remembers how she was struck by the team's tenacious spirit. "We had to overcome various difficulties when we started. For one, there were only 12 of us trying to get a school up and running," she admits.

Among the most pressing was space – the lack of it, rather. Then, SAAC was using a ward room on level 10 of St. Andrew's Community Hospital in Simei. But, as Siti points out, "When there's a will, there's a way."

Quickly, everyone got down to work. The team managed to carve out three classrooms and a group activity area, hence allowing classes to commence.

Siti had worked with youths and adults with autism spectrum disorders before joining SAAC. "The world for people with autism can be relatively limited; they may not have many options, opportunities and support. These are gaps I observed and wanted to help fill," she says.

"I deeply resonated with SAAC's call to 'serve others the way God would want him/her to be served'. It offers people with autism a safe space apart from home to learn, interact and grow. And as a teacher here, I can help our students and clients to live a meaningful and dignified life."

Some days can be especially challenging. On the morning of this interview, Siti and two colleagues were trying to calm down a student. He turned up in school anxious and angry because his parents had forgotten his school bag and drove home for it. "His behaviour may be due to the disruption in his morning routine," she explains.

Now a lead teacher at St. Andrew's Autism School (SAAS), Siti works hard to enrich the curriculum for students. She spends a lot of time studying the latest research and practices, and tries to adapt or incorporate these into her pedagogy.

Siti's passion for learning led her to leave SAAC in 2015 – "to see how other people did the same things" – but subsequently returned in 2019. The stint strengthened her resolve as a teacher and inspired new ideas to increase student engagement.

Siti was instrumental in introducing class collaborations into the curriculum. Here, students of different abilities and interests are grouped together for an activity, which allows them to model and learn from one another.

"To plan, design and implement effective programmes and activities for people with autism, we must take into consideration their learning profile, such as their strengths, weaknesses and interests," she says. "All this will indicate what quality of life is to the student and his/her family, and allows us to support them in this journey."



OUR PIONEER HEROES

ended in October, but our commitment to
nues. These members from our pioneering
as from their journey.

Serene Chen

Senior Psychologist, SAAH

Hired in 2005 as a junior therapist at SAAC, Serene Chen was prepared to support her colleagues in teaching and coaching. Only a team of 10, they were getting ready to take in the first batch of students.

"I read whatever I could to learn about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and intervention strategies," says Serene. "It enabled me to contribute to drafting the curriculum and creating lesson plans and materials, and setting up the environment."

St. Andrew's Autism School (SAAS) would become the first special education school in Singapore that received students aged 13 and older. It was also the first to introduce community outings for students and clients.

"Everyone doubled up," Serene remembers. "We helped and supported one another however we could. We had many adventures on our outings: boat rides, theme parks, roller coasters, and camps! Other special education schools were in awe!"

These weekly outings were not just about fun and laughter. They gave students and clients opportunities to pick up basic community living skills, such as taking public transport, observing social rules, and using money.

"The skills they learnt in the classroom were now generalised in the community through experiential learning in the natural setting," Serene explains.

Serene is now a senior psychologist with St. Andrew's Adult Home (SAAH). Singapore's first purpose-built facility for persons with autism, it provides them long-term residential care services. SAAH has 31 residents, all between 18 and 55 years old.

Here, she handles intake assessment, case work, intervention, consultation, and training. These require her



to work with residents, parents/caregivers, teachers/coaches/care staff, volunteers, medical professionals, community partners, among others.

Serene describes her role as a "voice for people with autism, their advocate, interpreter, and most importantly their friend". As she points out, "ASD traits are usually not understood - or adequately enough - by many."

Here's how she develops strategies to support clients and their caregivers/stakeholders: she begins by observing a client's behaviour and interacting with him/her based on his/her levels of functioning, strengths and interests. Then, with more information from caregivers/stakeholders, she gradually builds rapport with him/her. And by demonstrating and explaining to caregivers/stakeholders how these strategies are implemented, she helps them "to see the world through the lens of a person with autism."

All this calls for a tricky balance of social ethics, her personal values, and others' perspectives. "When I feel lost, I always go back to the question: what is best for this person at this point in time? That usually helps me stay focused on the student/client," she says.

Serene cherishes every moment she gets to work with people with autism. "I'm amazed by their quirky and unique thoughts. I once said to myself, 'I want to grow old with them; I want to know what happens to the rest of their life stories'. And I am doing just that!"



COMMUNITY

'Walk the Extra Mile with Me' Walkathon Charity Fair

Organised on 28 Oct by Children's Charities Association of Singapore, of which St. Andrew's Mission Hospital is a member, it featured uplifting performances by our own SAAS Percussion Ensemble. Meanwhile, a very special guest (thank you, Mrs Jane Ittogi Shanmugaratnam) stopped by the SAAC stall.



Volunteer Appreciation Night

Our journey to enable students/clients to lead dignified and meaningful lives has been enriched by friends and supporters. On the evening of 3 Nov, we celebrated and acknowledged the contributions of our volunteers and partners. Thank you for being part of our community.



Purple Parade

More than 13,000 people showed up at Suntec City on 4 Nov – so did we. SAAC's contingent of 40, which comprised staff, students, clients, caregivers and volunteers, completed the 400m-march in support of people with disabilities.



Sengkang MRT Outreach

In conjunction with Caring Commuter Week 2023, we spent the afternoon of 8 Nov at Sengkang MRT playing the Empathy Game with members of the public. Our outreach aimed to promote greater understanding of autism, and share how to interact with people with autism. #ICYMI here's how:



Be **PATIENT**

Give the person some time to process and respond.

Speak **LITERALLY** and **DIRECTLY**

Describe the request. Tell them, "It's raining very heavily", versus "It's raining cats and dogs."



Stay **CALM**

Remain calm when the person with autism shows signs of distress. Speak gently and clearly.



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