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Food from the heart for the needy Volunteers help distribute food to families with little or no income

By Victoria Vaughan

Beneficiaries (from left) Nor Nazihah, Madam Letan Sulaiman and Nor Najaha Mukhtar receiving their food rations from Ms Seah Boon Lee (fourth from left) and Madam Cheam Tiew Lin (seated) at the Marine Parade food distribution centre. -- ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG



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EVERY Friday at dusk, families and old folk, armed with trolleys and bags, form a queue outside the Marine Parade Residents' Committee (RC) centre. As they wait, they swop stories with one another while their children play at their feet.

Their common bond: All are struggling to get by, with an average monthly income, if there is an income at all, of up to \$200.

One by one, they are called in to receive basic food supplies like rice, oil, bread and canned food, to help feed their families and ease their financial angst.

Madam Mardiana Moho Aziz, 28, is raising four young children on her own after her husband was jailed recently for drug possession.

Forty-four-year-old Madam Rafidah Jaafar's husband suffered a stroke three years ago, which left him unable to work, leaving her to take a job to provide for him and their eight-year-old daughter. Both are Marine Parade residents.

They are just two of the 11,000 people supported by Food From The Heart (FFTH), a voluntary food distribution programme.

The initiative, which began at the Marine Parade centre in 2002, has grown to 23 centres, with a new one to open soon in Bendemeer.

Despite the woeful tales of bereavement, abandonment, crime, illness and loneliness, which lead people to FFTH, the atmosphere at the collection centre is positive and joyful.

Marine Parade is the largest centre and is still run by the original team headed by Madam Cheam Tiew Lin, who is a member of the area's Women's Executive Committee.

'I wanted to start a centre here as it's meaningful work. Some families have five children, most are single parents, the others are old folk who live alone. As the volunteers have worked here for seven years, it's like a family. We enjoy the work and we have fun,' said Madam Cheam, 63.

Every Friday morning, Madam Clara Roberts, vice-chairman of the RC, begins receiving the food deliveries gathered from across the island by a network of volunteers.

One such volunteer is Mrs Shoba Verghese, a kindergarten teacher at the Overseas Family School, who picks up bread from the Shangri-La and St Regis hotels near Tanglin.

'I like doing volunteer work and thought this was a meaningful cause. I was quite surprised when I realised people couldn't afford food in Singapore.

'In Singapore, we live such a privileged life that you don't get to see these things much,' said the mother of two who lived in the United Kingdom and Africa before moving to Singapore 14 years ago.

Madam Roberts has a deep connection with the many families she assists every Friday night.

'I can empathise with the people who are helped by the charity. I am one of them myself as I know what it is like to be in a desperate situation and I am thankful I was able to get out of it and can help others,' said the 72-year-old.

She lives with her youngest son, who is 49 and suffers from mental health issues. Madam Roberts said she was beaten by her husband when she was pregnant.

On Friday afternoons, the 14-strong team - comprising teachers, homemakers, a taxi driver and a lab technician - arrive at the RC to begin sorting and packing the food for distribution. When everything is laid out, the families are called in to receive a ration appropriate to their family size.

Details about each beneficiary - number of children, income and situation - are recorded by the charity.

The group estimates that the majority of people it helps have a per capita income of up to \$200 a month. The beneficiaries are found through a variety of ways, such as by the area MP following up a request for help. Some are on the town council's lists of those who have been unable to pay their rent. Friends and neighbours also let the volunteers know about a family which needs help or the family may approach the volunteers.

RC chair Ellen Lim, 52, runs the Nee Soon South Zone, near Khatib MRT station, which distributes food on Wednesday nights. She said that at first, the needy people were quite difficult to find as there is a 'loss of face' associated with having financial trouble.

'Now they come to the centre and talk about their problems and realise they are not so alone,' she said.

Despite the initial difficulty in locating those in need, Ms Lim finds she now has to turn people away: 'I think there are about 10 more families I know of that we could help,' she said.

The hurdle in helping more families is not the lack of volunteers - the charity has more than 3,400 - but the amount of food that it can commit to supply.

Most of the food for the collection centres comes from 12 monthly food drives conducted at some schools. This is topped up by hotels and bakeries, which donate leftovers and fresh bread while supermarkets provide food close to its sell-by date. Companies also regularly donate food.

FETH founder Christine Laimer said that each year, the food collection centres negotiate with her to help more families.

'People are depending on us. We can't provide for them one month and not the next. We have never taken someone off the list because of lack of food.

'Once we provide food to people, we have committed to that and we can't be inconsistent,' she explained.

Mrs Laimer does not know how many potential needy families they could help, but last year, the charity saw a 10 per cent rise due to the economic downturn.

An indicator in the rise of needy Singaporeans is The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund. It currently supports about 12,500 children. It started in 2000, with slightly more than 3,000 beneficiaries and the number keeps growing each year.

The ComCare Fund of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports offers several schemes to help those in need in Singapore.

In 2008, more than 25,700 cases of financial aid - for help with child-care costs and unemployment - were handled by ComCare. Depending on the scheme, applicants must have a monthly household income below \$2,500, \$1,800 or \$1,500 to qualify.

In the same year, 2,890 people applied to the fund for public assistance for those who are unable to work and have no other means of support. The majority, 2,281, were 'aged destitutes' followed by the disabled under 60, numbering 250.

Those receiving help find themselves in a desperate situation when the breadwinner is no longer able to work, when a family member falls sick placing extra strain on the weekly budget, or they are elderly and have no one to take care of them.

Before FFTH, these families survived on handouts from their neighbours or religious groups along with aid from existing government schemes.

As well as food donations, the charity receives money, which goes straight into an account to buy food when supplies run low. This can happen during Christmas and Chinese New Year when schools are on holiday and people are distracted by the festivities. During these times, the charity can call upon a list of donors to ask for extra help to fill the quota.

The St Regis Singapore adopted the charity in November and hopes to raise \$50,000 to \$70,000.

The charity requires \$650,000 a year for operation costs, which it tries to raise through its annual events such as the Chinese Opera and the Passion Ball.

It also looks for corporate sponsorship and donations to raise \$450,000 for purchasing food for its food goodie bag distribution at 15 local schools.

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MEANINGFUL CAUSE

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