

St Luke's Hospital celebrates silver generation

From cancer survivors to caregivers to entrepreneurs, inspiring seniors are featured in Being Silver book and film produced by the hospital for its 25th anniversary



Ms Ong Bee Yan turned entrepreneur and fashion model in her 60s.
PHOTOS: ST LUKE'S HOSPITAL

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Neither a stroke nor months of battling lung cancer have dimmed Mr Tan Ann Seng's smile as he talks to patients at St Luke's Hospital and helps them as a service ambassador.

The 73-year-old is one of 25 inspiring older people featured in Being Silver, a free e-book launched by St Luke's Hospital last Friday to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Five of the people in the e-book, including Mr Tan, are featured in a documentary film – also titled Being Silver – which is free to view on St Luke's Hospital's YouTube channel.

The film and e-book showcase "ordinary individuals who have led extraordinary lives", according to the e-book's epilogue written by the hospital's chief executive, Associate Professor Tan Boon Yeow.

Those featured include Ms Ong Bee Yan, who turned entrepreneur and fashion model in her 60s; and Dr Eileen Aw, 83, who is the first executive director of St Luke's Hospital and currently serves as a deputy registrar of marriages. Former national body-builder Ching Teng Soon, 86, and retired teacher Yong Sek Long, 92, who is vice-chair of the senior citizens' ministry in Bethesda Katong Church, also share their stories in the film.

The people featured in Being Silver were chosen from an open call for nominations earlier this year. A spokesman for the hospital said the idea was to encourage and inspire other seniors to age positively.

St Luke's Hospital was the first in Singapore to be dedicated to elderly patients, though it has expanded its services beyond that demographic.

The Being Silver e-book and film aim to raise awareness of the hospital's mission and raise funds for its work. The hospital is an Institution of a Public Character and sees 2,300 inpatients and 3,500 outpatients every year.

Mr Tan, the service ambassador, is a former patient turned volunteer turned hospital employee. A former handyman, he was admitted to St Luke's for rehabilitation after he had a stroke in 2009.

In 2012, he decided to volunteer at the hospital to motivate other patients. He went on walks with them and encouraged them not to be disheartened. He himself had been encouraged by watching his toddler



Mr Tan Ann Seng (left, in blue, on one of the walks he took day after day) is a cancer survivor who is a service ambassador at St Luke's Hospital.

grandson's determined attempts to learn how to walk, he says. He has three daughters and eight grandchildren.

In 2014, Mr Tan joined the hospital staff as a service ambassador, bringing wheelchairs and helping patients get around. In 2019, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and given only a 50 per cent chance of survival. Last year, he had to have surgery, followed by radiotherapy.

The pain and weakness were almost intolerable, he says. "My body was burning, itching. I couldn't eat or sleep at night. All my muscles were gone, you could see only bone." Though he wanted to give up on the aggressive treatment many times, he kept going because he wanted to see his second daughter again. She and her family were in Brunei and unable to visit because of pandemic restrictions.

Mr Tan's cancer is now in remission and he is back at work at St Luke's Hospital. He was excited to be filmed for the Being Silver documentary, but also embarrassed, he says. "For me, if the patients are happy when they see me, that's enough," he adds. "If the patients always keep smiling, then I'm happy."

The idea of enjoying life through ageing and adversity also appeals to Ms Ong, who has around 4,700 Instagram followers on her account @grey_evolution. The 65-year-old was the cover model for Harper's

Bazaar Singapore's April issue, though she has been camera-shy for most of her life. She started her Instagram account to share her love of cafe-hopping and show that people her age enjoy life too.

She is also an "elderpreneur" and, in 2016, co-founded an artisanal coffee business, IdegreeC, with her husband Richard Koh. Running a business helps keep her mentally sharp, she says. She worries that she might develop dementia, as her sister and late mother did.

She thinks it is important for seniors to stay active by learning and doing new things. That is why her Instagram account has the word "evolution" in it, she says. "Us seniors are becoming more active and fearless. We must challenge ourselves to face our fears and do the things we were afraid to do."

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• Watch the Being Silver film at bit.ly/silhsygt.

• Download the e-book at slh.org.sg/silver/silver-stories until March 31 next year.

• To donate to St Luke's Hospital, go to www.giving.sg/slh/silverscreen or bit.ly/beingsilver for details.