Act 1: How to treat your foreign maid

Young Singaporeans set out to correct stereotypes about foreign workers

Debbie Yong

ON THE 21st - the 21st birthday of a Little India bookshop, Singaporean Shu Naik, 25, raised her voice — and a decorated 21 — at Indonesian maid Umarnah, 27.

"You liar! This is my sister's ring, I recognize it," shouted Ms Naik.

But Umarnah burst out laughing.

Singaporean Fanny Rangin, 26, and Indonesian maid Northi Rasti, 60, who had stayed behind watching the scene from the side, both chipped in:

"You must look more fierce, Naik." The four women, along with a third maid, Susani Kambas, 42, and Singaporean students Roshan Toh, 20, and Alex Lee, 18, are part of local arts group Migrant Voices and they have been returning from gigs to keep every worker for a play.

Their 15-minute production, titled Blood, Blindly and Trapped In Love, will be staged in the open space at Little India outside Raffles Institution Centre on Dec 10 for International Migrants Day. It depicts three common scenarios between foreign workers and their employers.

Ms Naik, who is in Migrant Voices, said: "There are already existing advocacy groups so we wanted to use the arts to encourage the exchange of artistic and cultural knowledge between migrant cultures and Singaporean society, especially among youth."

After recent public discussions over the unwelcoming attitude towards foreign workers here, young Singaporeans are speaking out to try and set things right.

Full-time National Serviceman Vikash Varun, 22, joined Migrant Voices recently as he "wanted to be more involved" after filming an independent documentary on foreign workers in January.

His film, a project that he took on while attending a writing workshop at the Singapore Media Academy, highlights the plight of an Indian construction worker in Singapore.

The worker was suspended from work, denied compensation and even had his salary docked after injuring his back at work in January.

"It was unjust and I wanted to do something to highlight his plight," said Mr Varun, who communicated with the worker in Tamil.

For many young people, it was while they were doing research for a school project that they learnt to empathise with the plight of foreign workers here.

A first-year accountancy student at Singapore Management University, Grace Tan, 19, visited workers' hostels in Jurong and Saki Bulat to document their living conditions for a report on unethical issues in the construction industry, for her business, government and society course.

She said: "I used to be quite afraid of them and hold many stereotypes like they were dangerous to be around.

"But I realised they are actually quite gentle and very shy. They wouldn't even speak to me when I tried to approach them."

Nanyang Technological University student Sip Nadia Chia-Zeilke, 24, said: "I don't think many Singaporeans look down on foreign workers, we just take them for granted."

She and her classmate Dian Melati, 23, produced a 70-page book titled Foreign Talents for their final-year project. It was filled with colour photos and profiles featuring foreign workers and their hobbies in sports, acting, writing and music.

She found out that some workers were even degree-holders. She said it's just basic humanity not to look at people differently just because they do menial tasks. At the end of the day, they are just like you and me, trying to make a living for themselves and their families back home."

Third-year National University of Singapore sociology student Eugene Zakharov Tan, 23, assembled the team that was used to view foreign workers as "villains" and turn a blind eye to their existence.

He started viewing things differently three months ago, when he began organizing a photography exhibition and a forum with migrant workers' rights groups Transient Workers Count Too (TWCT) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) as part of a service-learning project.

He hopes to hold a graduation visit to popular foreign worker hangouts and Home's shelter for foreign workers to take photographs and interview the workers about their lifestyles.

The pictures were put on display for three days at NUS last week.

About 40 students attended the two-hour forum last Friday. They posed many questions to the panelists: TWCT president John Gei, Home founder president Bridget Lew and two migrant workers.

"Just as we have certain stereotypes about migrant workers, it's a form of stereotyping to say that Singaporeans are prejudiced against them," Eugene said.

"There are people working to make the lives of migrant workers better here. I'm glad this issue was brought up as this positive side can be presented," Mr Gei said. "The main concern of most young people is not so much integration as seeing that justice is done and fairness prevails."

"But the effort to find out about how migrant workers live and the readiness to be more accepting are perhaps a step towards integrating migrant workers into society over time."

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