NUS don finds joy in helping those in need

China-born Canadian sees volunteering as way of giving back to society

OVER the past 17 months, China-born Canadian national Zhao Shengdeng, 34, has been helping lonely individuals living on the fringes of Singapore society.

They could be elderly women with no relatives, languishing in nursing homes; blind old men with no one to talk to; or the disabled living in filthy one-room rental flats.

The assistant professor of computer science at the National University of Singapore, who moved here in December 2008, has volunteered at least one weekend since July last year. Each volunteering session usually lasts 1½ to five hours.

When he first started out, he took part in a range of cultural and fitness-related activities such as painting murals or coordinating community brisk-walking events.

But of late, helping the marginalised has become a special interest.

Before moving to Singapore, the Shanghai native knew little about Singapore beyond the fact that it was a Garden City with “fabulous efficiency and a world-class university”, he says. “But my volunteer work has enabled me to see aspects that are not easily visible to outsiders.”

Dr Zhao’s desire to help out, however, goes deeper than wanting to get to know his new home. After studying and working in the United States, Canada and Japan, he wants to “settle down” here, says the University of California, Berkeley graduate, who also has a PhD in computer science from the University of Toronto. “Singapore has given me a great career and living environment, so I am willing to help.”

Two weekends ago, he was among a group of volunteers doing house-cleaning who visited a wheelchair-bound man in a one-room rental flat in Bedok.

The walls and floor were black with soot. There were bugs everywhere and the flat was cluttered with junk, including 14 brooms stacked on top of one another in a corner of the flat.

“The elderly occupant said he had not cleaned the place since he lost his mobility 10 years ago,” Dr Zhao says.

Sixteen volunteers spent an average of 2½ hours each, over two weekends, cleaning up his house.

Last week, Dr Zhao was in MacPherson, painting the homes of the elderly to give them a “bright new environment” to live in. “It was also fun to pick up a skill,” he says.

As Singapore ages, the ranks of these lonely and helpless old folk are set to grow, he says. He hopes more young people will come forward to help.

He is also putting his professional skills to use, in the hope of furthering the volunteer cause. He is developing a computer game – similar to Facebook craze Farmville – that will allow young people to accumulate virtual credits if they volunteer.

“In Singapore and in most parts of the world, too many people are caught up pursuing personal happiness,” he says. “But strong societies are those that are most willing to help the helpless.”

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