

# Journey through Singapore's Chinatown

By Dr Foo Fung Fong

When I graduated from medical school, one of my dreams was to work with children. I love kids and so, I started off my medical career, thinking that a life in medicine and paediatrics would lie before me. I never did become a paediatrician, but little in my wildest dreams did I realise what that "call" to serve children would result in.



Dr Foo is married to Dr Chris Cheah. They have three children.

While settling into the throes of medical practice and married and family life, I found myself spending time with children in the community as well. I volunteered to help at Yong-en Care Centre, a community service that my church had set up right in the heart of Chinatown. I met children like Seng Hong\*, a nine-year-old boy, who is illiterate and who has never been to school. He roams the streets of Chinatown together with his group of "back street boys". They play basketball, disturb stray cats and rummage through dustbins, looking for brick-brack for their play. Then there are others like Swee Cheng\*, an eight-year-old girl who can hardly read or write. She struggles with school work and is very attached to her mother whom she sees only on weekends. She is terrified of her father, who is either absent from home, or when back, is usually in a drunken state. This is not your typical scene of high-achieving children, well-mannered and well-provided for by doting parents, hot-housing them to maximise their talents and potential, and keeping up with the latest educational pursuits in Singapore. Even in our well-run society, there are children like them who have fallen through the gaps.

My heart went out to such kids, and so I plunged into helping them and mobilising others to help as well. This included setting up tuition classes for children and youth, running English literacy lessons for the slow readers and life

skills sessions for those from dysfunctional families. Fun and wholesome recreational pursuits were organised for them as well to keep them off the streets. I was so thankful for principles and practices in social medicine picked up from social medicine and Public Health days, as I went visiting homes that were overcrowded, under-ventilated and reeking with the stench of human neglect. I found myself revisiting my psychiatry lessons too, as I met children and families living in anxiety and depression, and using my knowledge to determine learning disabilities in some others as well. General medicine took on a whole new meaning for me.

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Christmas comes to Chinatown: Dr Foo (last row, extreme left) celebrating with children at Yong-en Care Centre.

Three years ago, I finally left a comfortable group practice, to give more time to helping the needy in the



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Chinatown community. There has been no turning back since then. The scope of work has now expanded to include work with at risk children and youth in schools as well.

The needs seem endless. As Chinatown also has a predominantly elderly population, Yong-en Care Centre also runs a Dementia Day Care Centre, and I now also deal with those in their twilight years, and those going through their "second childhood". It is heartwarming to hear of the escapades of their earlier years, but heart-wrenching to see how their failing memories prevent them from recognising their very own loved ones, including spouse and children.

Satisfaction for me in this work comes in a myriad of ways – when the "gang" of boys run up to you as you walk

the streets, to excitedly share their adventures with you; when a parent comes back to say how her child is coping better in school; when heartfelt thanks and simple grins are offered to show deep appreciation; when a forgetful elderly lady smiles and waves goodbye to you as she returns home from the Centre, obviously no longer depressed. These are all treasures that encourage me to continue to press on to make a difference in the lives of these people.

As has been succinctly said in the Bible: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap."

May we all experience Joy and Peace in this Season of Giving! Wishing one and all a Blessed Christmas Season 2004 and a Great Year ahead in 2005!

*\* Names have been changed. ■*