

• The big sister

YONG YOEK LING, 29, *civil servant*



“YOU CAN’T JUST WALK INTO SOMEONE’S LIFE AND EXPECT THEM TO LISTEN TO YOU [BUT] SINCERITY HELPS.”

Yoek Ling does not have a younger sister of her own.

But she has chosen to be a “big sister” to a troubled teenage girl as part of the Beautiful People project.

Founded by social activist Melissa Aratani Kwee, it’s a volunteer group that links professional women to teen girls at risk, to guide them on the right path.

Yoek Ling explains: “I’ve led a blessed life so far. I’ve experienced the joy of fulfilling my dream to study overseas so I want to pay it forward. I’ve been volunteering at Beautiful People since 2008. Every year, I take on a ‘little sister’ and act as a friend and ‘big sister’ to her.”

Beautiful People works with girls from organisations like Beyond Social Services, Andrew & Grace Home, and

Perrapis, a Muslim welfare and education organisation. The girls are usually trapped on the wrong side of life, with many being arrested for petty crimes like shoplifting and gang fights. Some have had abortions.

Together with other volunteers, Yoek Ling organises training workshops, job exposures and annual camps to equip the “little sisters” with a sense of self-worth and essential life skills such as goal setting. The aim? To get the girls ready for the real world.

But what Yoek Ling truly focuses on is meeting her “little sister” on a one-to-one basis. “I get to know her better as we talk about anything under the sun over prata and Milo, from her friendships to life goals to the dynamics of boy-girl relationships. That’s when I get a window to her views and

aspirations and guide her accordingly.”

In fact, the project is called Beautiful People because the “big sisters” help these troubled teenage girls realise the potential in themselves despite what they’ve endured.

It’s not an easy journey. “You can’t just walk into someone’s life and expect them to listen to you,” Yoek Ling shares. “Sincerity helps – they open up when they feel you really care.” There may be many differences in terms of their age, background and experiences. But that doesn’t deter Yoek Ling. “At the end of the day, what we do have in common – like a wish to achieve our personal goals – draws us together. Every girl has a dream and it helps to have someone to walk with her, through the struggles and the little triumphs along the way,” she points out. *HW*