

Building connections with residents of rental flats

by Yang Jun Xin

Joanne Yau, a community worker at Beyond Social Services, is also a mother of two. She shares, "My conversations with parents who live in rental flats usually revolve around our children's education and health. I've learned that some things we take for granted are very difficult for them to access."

40-year-old Joanne Yau is a community worker at Beyond Social Services, a voluntary welfare organisation.

Having joined the social work profession in 2010, she has since been going on daily rounds to visit rental flat residents door to door, fostering solid connections with them.

Speaking to *Lianhe Zaobao*, Yau said, "We believe that the problems faced by members of the community are best solved internally, by tapping on the support networks they have in their neighbourhood, rather than bringing in a third party to intervene."

That's the reason that, besides house visits, community workers also organise team-building activities at void decks every 3 to 6 months, inviting and empowering residents to initiate, plan and attend these events in order to collectively discuss common issues and challenges.

For example, they once facilitated a dream-building conversation with the youths living in rental flats at Ghim Moh. They discussed their aspirations and visions of the future. Through such dialogues, community workers at times unearth deeper concerns and uncertainties that they can then channel specific resources to address.

At the start of May 2019, Beyond Social Services helped a 17-year-old single mother to organise a community group conference, assembling a network that consisted of her family, friends and neighbours. They came together to understand how to better support her through her journey of being a mother.

Yau added, "This single mother was initially very opposed to community workers helping her, because she worried that we would criticise her parenting methods, or even take the child away from her. So we facilitated this meeting in the hope that she would feel supported by the people around her.

"Coincidentally, her birthday is this month, so we also fulfilled a wish of hers. She lost her mother at the age of 8 or 9, and previously expressed her wish to eat fried macaroni, a dish her mother used to make for her. On the day of the community group conference, another mother in the neighbourhood made exactly this dish for her."

Yau herself is a mother of a 10-year-old son and a 5-year-old daughter. Community work has enabled her to understand the amount of care and love a parent can feel for their child. The challenges every parent faces can be quite similar, no matter their socio-economic background.

"My conversations with parents who live in rental flats usually revolve around our children's education and health. I've learned that some things we take for granted are very difficult for them to access, such as swimming lessons or art classes for our children. That's why Beyond Social Services tries its best to provide low-income families with access to such resources, or recruit volunteers to tutor the kids."