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Client: Beyond Social Services
Date: 19 December 2019
Publication: CNA Insider
Page/Size/URL: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/low-income-women-change-lives-bakers-beyond-social-services-12195482>
Headline: The low-income women who are baking in change into their lives, together
Summary: The article is on Bakers Beyond, an initiative by Beyond Social Services, where women from rental neighbourhoods take on festive bake sales to earn money. The article shares more on the growth of Bakers Beyond through the years and how the group has provided the women with a source of emotional and financial support.



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By Derrick A Paulo



By Ruth Smalley

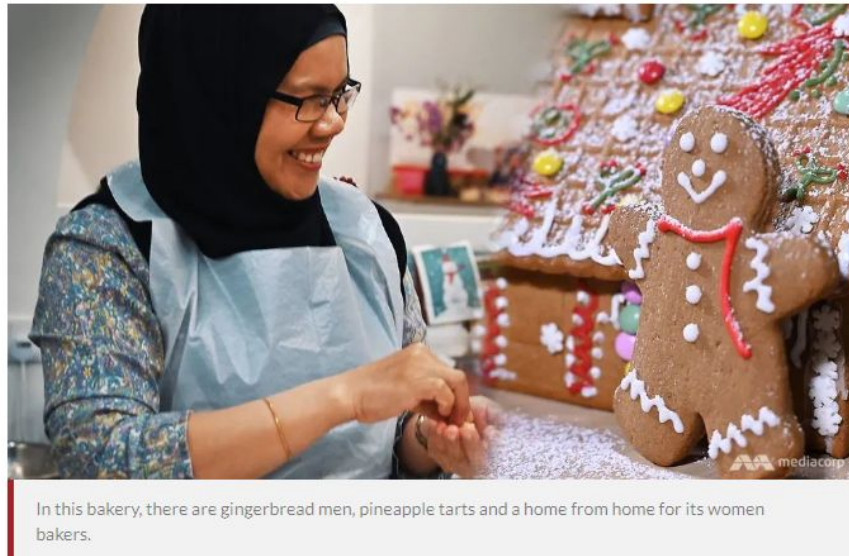
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The low-income women who are baking in change into their lives, together

19 Dec 2019 06:30AM
(Updated: 19 Dec 2019 07:55AM)

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In this bakery, there are gingerbread men, pineapple tarts and a home from home for its women bakers.

SINGAPORE: A fantastic smell wafts through the air the moment the door opens. Inside, four women are kneading and shaping dough with their hands. They are making pineapple tarts.

It is a simple scene in a humble place in Whampoa. But the lives of the women here have been far from simple.

Single mother Azizah Mohd Noor has four children, and the youngest is hyperactive with borderline intellectual functioning. Home is usually not a place of rest for her.

“But here, I feel peaceful, happy with the situation,” said the 48-year-old, referring to the training space at the HDB block in Whampoa Drive. “It’s like we’re free to do what we want here.”

It is also where the women are like family to each other.

Everyone calls Rusnah Sajee “Mak Rus”, not only because the 59-year-old is the oldest among them, but also because they consider her to be their substitute mother.



Rusnah Sajee, the woman they call 'Mak'.

When Yashmin Abdullah received a marriage proposal, the Filipina sought Rusnah's advice about remarrying. "I always thank Mak Rus, who told me this man is good," said the 45-year-old, who got married last year.

Mostly, however, the elder woman dishes out advice about baking, such as to make dough by hand instead of using an electric mixer.

"You can feel the texture and (whether) it's equal in every part. If you use the mixer, the strength of the mixer might be too hard on the dough, and it won't turn out well," she said.

Baking is what brought them together, and has benefited them all. These women from rental neighbourhoods are able to earn money from festive bake sales and corporate social responsibility projects, as part of a programme called Bakers Beyond.



From left: Yashmin Abdullah, Rusnah Sajee, Juriana Suhoot and Azizah Mohd Noor

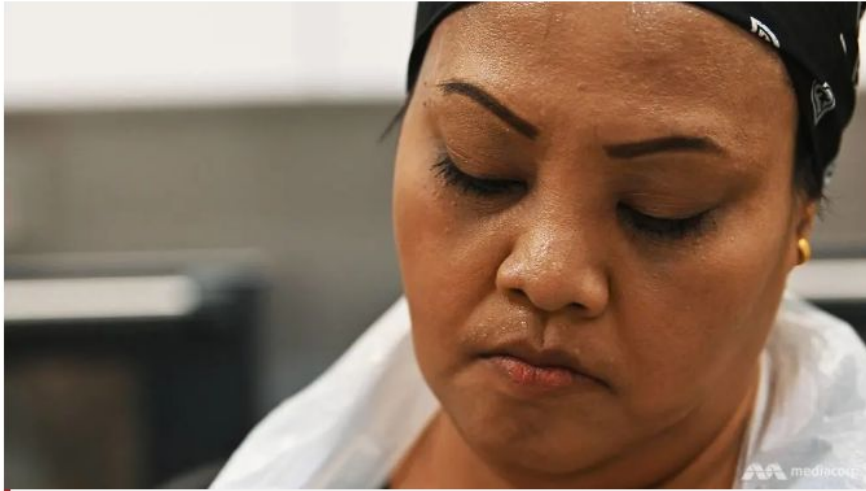
Now in its sixth year, it is poised to reach out to more women — and perhaps provide a second home for them, just as its current bakers have done so for themselves.

AZIZAH'S STORY

In Azizah's case, it was in 2015 when she joined Bakers Beyond, after she got to know Beyond Social Services, the charity behind the initiative. "I loved to bake, but I didn't know how," she said. "I just baked anyhow."

That soon changed as she learned new skills in the volunteer-run programme. She also found emotional respite from her domestic turmoil.

Her divorce had drained her. And when her ex-husband remarried, he did not allow her to see her elder daughter for two years, even though they had joint custody.



Azizah working on her pineapple tarts in total concentration.

“(When) I saw other families and their children, I felt sad because I needed my daughter,” she recalled.

Not only was she feeling down, she was in financial difficulties. Her mother had fallen sick, so she had quit her job as a food packer in a catering company to become a full-time carer.

She could only work part-time as a cleaner, which meant not having enough money for her children. “I couldn’t afford to take them out — to eat outside or watch movies,” she recounts.

That was the first thing she rectified when she began to earn money with Bakers Beyond. If there are orders for, say, 100 hampers during Chinese New Year, Hari Raya or Deepavali, she can earn around S\$600 to S\$700.



“Sometimes I (take my children) to Johor Baru,” she said. “Of this money, I can (also) save some.”

At the same time, when she wants to get away from the messiness of home life, Bakers Beyond is her escape, where she has friends to turn to for advice and more.

For example, Rusnah has advised her — to good effect — to be patient with her nine-year-old with special needs.

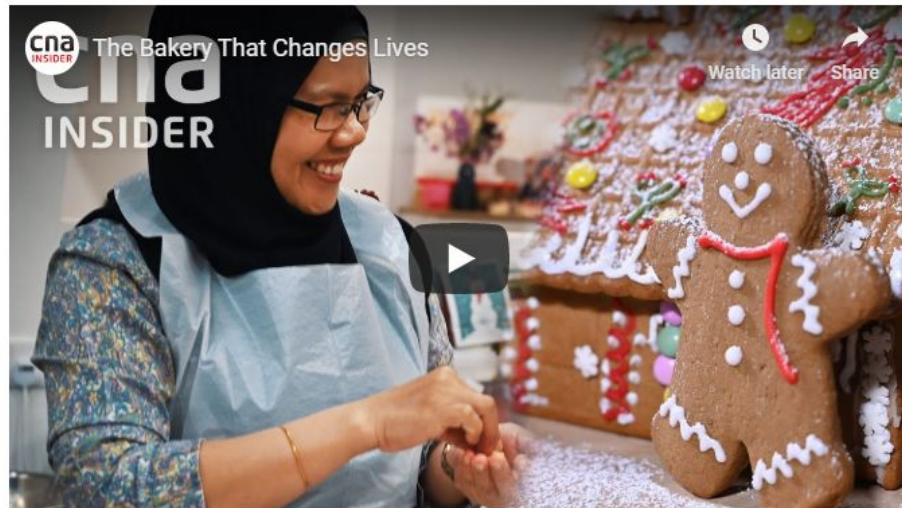
And when her mother died, the group stepped in to help “with everything”, from the preparation to the clearing up. Yashmin even cooked food to serve the mourners after the burial.

“They said I didn’t need to come up with a single cent. I was really touched,” said a teary-eyed Azizah.

ON THE MOVE AT FIRST

Bakers Beyond has given women like her a home from home. When the programme first started, however, they did not have a place to call their own, as they had to move from kitchen to kitchen.

WATCH: The bakery that changes lives (3:45)



They sometimes operated in social enterprise Samsui Kitchen and in the Agape Village, a social service hub in Toa Payoh, depending on the availability of the spaces.

Sometimes that meant baking in Samsui Kitchen from 10am to 2pm, then packing up and rushing to the Agape Village to continue baking from 3pm to 7pm.

Sometimes they also had to train in Beyond Social Services' main office in Jalan Klinik, where the baking space was small.

Having to move around was something Yashmin could relate to in her life, as she was once homeless. She came here in 2008 after marrying a Singaporean. But when he started divorce proceedings in 2014, he kicked her out.



Yashmin had few friends to confide in at that time.

She took their two children with her and lived in a homeless shelter for nine months and in interim housing for another nine months.

There was added uncertainty because with a divorce happening, her long-term visit pass was revoked, which meant she could not get a job. And she had to go to the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority monthly to renew her visitor's pass.

“The feeling was very hard,” she said. “But when I saw my children at the time, I said I needed to face this problem for (them).”

Eventually, her Family Service Centre found her a rental flat and she started working part-time after getting custody of her children.



A friend she had made at the shelter also introduced her to Beyond Social Services. Although she had “zero knowledge” of baking, she gave Bakers Beyond a try, and the programme, in turn, gave her “peace”, “laughter” and new friends.

“(With) them, I can talk a lot, (sharing) my problems,” said the usually soft-spoken lady. “They’re very good people.”

BAKING, SEWING AND BEYOND

When it came to baking, the women taught her patiently. Her first task was simply to ensure that cookies in the oven did not burn. Today, she is a whizz at making the gingerbread man, her favourite.

The women learn on the job from each other, from volunteers and from facilitators brought in to teach them, say, a royal icing recipe and, in one instance, a pineapple tart recipe brought back from Hong Kong.



Adding vanilla essence to their pineapple tart recipe, they reduce the sugar content.

They get baking orders through Beyond Social Services, but they handle the business-related matters, for example creating a system of remuneration for the different roles the team members play.

“They have greater ownership of the projects (than before),” said Stella Jayanthi, a team leader at Beyond Social Services.

“Six years ago, I was doing a lot of running around, deciding, budgeting and all that. Now I’m participating only 20 per cent of the time.”

They also get to keep all the proceeds, but they contribute a “love offering” of about S\$60 a day to the charity for using utilities and the baking space.

That was the amount they were charged before the Bakers Beyond training space was officially opened last month with the help of sponsors such as Mapletree Investments, Cargill TSF Asia and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.



The unassuming exterior of the Bakers Beyond training space at 75 Whampoa Drive.

The space used to be Beyond Social Services’ storeroom. After renovation, it now comes complete with convection ovens, electric cake mixers and other commercial equipment.

“The women had a dream,” said T Ranganayaki, the charity’s deputy executive director. “They wanted a space of their own, where they can share their success with other women.”

There are now eight to 10 women in the programme, with the youngest aged 40. But she hopes the training space will be where more in the community can learn not only baking, but also skills like sewing.

“These are the kinds of things we’re looking (to do) next year,” Jayanthi added, “(for) any woman who’s in low-income housing, who’s interested to learn skills ... as long as you’re willing to travel here (and) participate in the training.”

Business training is also on the cards, which is something Azizah is especially interested in, as her dream is to open her own shop.

“Thank God many people — volunteers — have helped us and taught us in this training centre. So far, I can see that I’ll go further,” she said.



She wants to upgrade and "be the best", Azizah said passionately.

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