

Blazing the Trail

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AWWA

A Commemorative Book to Mark
55 Years of Driving Social Change



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Foreword

This history is more than a chronicle of milestones. It is a tribute to the visionaries who laid the foundation of AWWA, an organisation which has been a beacon of hope for the most vulnerable in our society since 1970. It not only captures the stories of lives uplifted and communities strengthened, it also acknowledges the foresight and resilience of those who, through the past five decades and more, have so tirelessly advocated for inclusion and dignity for all. It is a story of partnerships, innovation and a relentless pursuit of excellence in service delivery.

What began as a modest initiative by a group of dedicated Asian women has grown into a multi-service organisation supporting families, health and senior care, education and persons with disability regardless of race or creed. This reflects not only AWWA's responsiveness to the changing needs of the community but also the enduring spirit of care which defines its mission to empower the disadvantaged.

As you delve into this history, you will witness the remarkable journey of an organisation that has weathered challenges, embraced change, and remained steadfast to its purpose. You will also come to appreciate the dedication of its individuals – the founders, volunteers, staff and supporters – who have been and continue to be the heart and soul of AWWA.

I myself was personally transformed by AWWA. My roots in the social service sector are in AWWA when I first started serving there as a board member providing pro bono legal advice in 1994. AWWA's philosophy and mission have shaped all that I do to this very day.

This publication serves as both a tribute to AWWA's legacy and an inspiration for the work yet to be done. In celebrating the achievements of the past, we are reminded of the power of collective action and the profound impact that kindness and commitment can have on society. As you go through these pages, may you reflect on the importance of giving back to the community and to take forward the values that have been the cornerstone of AWWA's work. It is a call to action for all of us to continue building a society where everyone has the opportunity to flourish.



Ms Anita Fam

National Council of Social Service President and former AWWA Vice President and Board Director.



Mrs Kulasekaram (second from right) warmly welcomes the wife of Indonesia's Ambassador to Singapore, with Mrs Shakuntala Bhatia (middle) and Puan Sri Peggy Shaw (first from right). (circa 1970)



"The establishment of the Asian Women's Welfare Association is a humble effort to provide voluntary service for the needy in Singapore. Several eminent organisations already exist for this purpose, and ours is only a modest addition to the helping hands which are engaged in a good cause."

Mrs Shakuntala Bhatia,
Founder of AWWA

Singapore, 1970

**Who doesn't love a good story?
One that celebrates the power of community, vision,
and resilience – just like the inspiring story of AWWA.**

This story began in 1970 when Singapore was still a young nation finding its way after gaining independence just five years earlier. In this climate of uncertainty, a group of visionary women came together to form AWWA, determined to spearhead innovative initiatives that uplift the underprivileged and overlooked members of society.

As Singapore grew into a global success story, AWWA was there every step of the way, flourishing through the steadfast support of countless individuals and organisations. Decades later, this story continues to be a living testament to those who dared to dream big 55 years ago.



(From left to right) Mrs Leaena Tambyah, Mrs Jaya Anand, Mrs Kulasekaram, Mrs Nimmi Handa, Mrs Shakuntala Bhatia, and Mrs Padma Kumaran. (1995)

Key Milestones

1970



- Family Welfare Service started to help vulnerable families (Now called Family Service Centre)

1976



- Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged started to shelter disadvantaged elderly (Now called Senior Community Home)

1979



- Handicapped Children's Playgroup started for kids with multiple disabilities and autism (Now called AWWA School @ Napiri)

1991



- TEACH ME (Therapy & Educational Assistance for Children in Mainstream Education) pioneered (Now called Community Integration Service)

1997



- Senior Activity Centre launched for engagement and socio-recreational activities (Now called Active Ageing Centre)

1998



- READYCARE Centre started for seniors with disabilities in their post-hospitalisation recovery (Now called Rehab & Day Care Centre)

2004



- Early Years Centre commenced intervention for children with moderate to severe disabilities (Now part of AWWA's Early Intervention Continuum)

2006



- Centre for Caregivers started to support caregivers of seniors and persons with disabilities



- SMILES (Students Meet for Interaction, Learning and Enrichment Services) after-school care centre started for kids with additional needs (Now called Special Student Care Centre)

2012



- Development Support Programme started for children with mild developmental needs (Now called Development Support & Learning Support)

2014



- Personal Care Service (Disability) started for adults with disabilities (Renamed to Home Personal Care Service)

2015



- Allied Health Professional Group established as a manpower hub for internal programmes and external agencies



- Dementia Day Care Centre in Ang Mo Kio started for clients with mild to severe dementia

2016



- Integrated Home & Day Care Centre launched to support ageing at home



- Kindle Garden started as Singapore's first inclusive preschool

2018



- Transitional Shelter opened to accommodate displaced families

2019



- AWWA conferred its first Charity Transparency Award for good governance standards in the charity sector

2021



- 'Care Beyond Walls' piloted to innovate and create dementia care and community inclusion

2022



- AWWA Home and Day Activity Centre started to support adults with mild to severe physical and multiple disabilities



- AWWA conferred its second Charity Transparency Award



- 'Family Empowerment Programme' piloted, Singapore's first randomised controlled trial for unconditional cash transfers



- AWWA School @ Bedok started to support students with autism

2023



- AWWA conferred its third Charity Transparency Award



- Launch of AWWake, AWWA's internal innovation drive
- Launch of AWWA Learning Conference to strengthen holistic care principles for selected client care staff and centre managers across all AWWA services
- Launch of AWWAcademy, AWWA's internal e-learning platform
- AWWA named as one of Singapore's Best Employers of the Year by The Straits Times

2024



- AWWA conferred its fourth Charity Transparency Award
- Kampung AWWA launched to provide seniors, caregivers, and residents with an integrated social space to enhance their well-being within the community



- AWWA conferred the SkillsFuture Employer Awards (Gold) 2024 for its commitment to upskilling its workforce and lifelong learning
- AWWA named as one of Singapore's Best Employers of the Year by The Straits Times



- AWWA Learning Conference rebranded as AWWA Synposium and refreshed for the learning and development of more staff



Unveiling our Narrative

CHAPTER ONE

Today, Singapore is a first-world nation marked by political stability, a robust economy, and a high standard of living. But this was not always the case. Following its independence in 1965, the fledgling nation focused on meeting the basic needs of its people. Under the leadership of then Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore embarked on an ambitious nation-building effort, creating a pressing need for social service agencies to complement the government's welfare efforts.

AWWA was born from a simple yet powerful idea – to serve the underprivileged and contribute to the nation's growth. Inspired by this vision, AWWA's founding members, Mrs Shakuntala Bhatia and Mrs Vimala Kulasekaram (Mrs Kula), stepped forward to make a difference.

How It All Began



Mrs Kula (left) addressing the ladies. Also in attendance are the First Lady of Singapore, Puan Noor Aishah (second from left) and Mrs Bhatia (third from left). (1970)

On 24 November 1969, 20 ladies of South Asian origin met at 2 Peirce Road, the residence of Mrs Bhatia, wife of the High Commissioner of India to Singapore. The meeting was inspired by Mrs Bhatia's vision of forming an all-women association dedicated to social service in

Singapore. She had shared this idea with her friend, Mrs Kula, who was already active in volunteer work and eager to help. A conscious effort was made to invite ladies educated in social and political issues and already involved in charitable causes.



Mrs Kula (middle) and Puan Noor Aishah (right) at a tea party. (1970)

Attendees, including Mrs Dolly Davenport Sinha, who attended this meeting with her mother-in-law, Mrs Hena Sinha, vividly remembered being inspired by Mrs Bhatia's passion. She expressed confidence they could make a meaningful impact while showcasing the capabilities of Asian women. For Dr Uma Rajan, the youngest attendee that day, the event was not a typical coffee chat – it was a call to action.

Though they lacked funds, staff, and an office, their enthusiasm and resolve to serve the disadvantaged were boundless. United by a shared vision, these ladies decided to cooperate with existing organisations and augment their efforts rather than compete with them.

What's in a Name?

From its early days, the organisation welcomed volunteers of all nationalities, prompting the question, why the name Asian Women's Welfare Association?

While the name highlighted the leadership of Asian women in social service, it did not restrict membership. Rather, it symbolised the readiness of local women to take charge of the social service sector and reflected Singapore's diverse ethnic fabric.

"When we got together and we were discussing and thinking on the name...we really wanted something to...stand out and indicate that it is, the local ladies who are going to do this,"¹ explained Mrs Kula.

¹ (From the oral history interview of Mrs Thilliampalam Kulasekaram, Vimalavathy (Mrs) @ Mrs T Kulasekaram (Accession No. 001502, Disc 5), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore).

Care Comes A(WWA) Knocking

What was going through the minds of these women when they decided to contribute to Singapore's welfare landscape in those early days? The British had announced the withdrawal of their military forces from Singapore, which led to the departure of the wives of British servicemen, who had been actively involved in social work. Mrs Kula recalls that Mrs Bhatia saw an opportunity and urged local Indian women to engage in social service work, as it was believed that they were not significantly contributing to the welfare sector.

Mrs Bhatia leveraged her position to rally support from expatriates and affluent local Indians alike, persuading them to join the cause.

Recognising the need for a strong local ally, she turned to Mrs Kula, a Sri Lankan woman known for her volunteer work. Together, in 1969, they laid the foundation for what would become AWWA.

For women like Dr Maharajan, Mrs Thevasadan, Mrs Jagkoda, and Mrs Nair, who were present at the first meeting, it was a significant shift. These women, often identified by their husband's family names rather than their own identities, were on the cusp of making history – shaping AWWA and carving out their legacies in the process.



Asian Women's Welfare Association logo.

Dr Rajan echoed this sentiment, noting, "We were there, not as Indians or Singaporeans, but as Asian women."

AWWA was always inclusive, welcoming anyone willing to serve. Within six months, over a hundred women had joined AWWA. In June 1970, a constitution was drafted and AWWA was formally registered as "multi-racial and non-sectarian" in character, "dedicated solely to welfare work in

Singapore". Mrs Bhatia reiterated, "We would like to stress that the association is open to women of all races and all Asian countries who are staying in Singapore."

The inclusion of the word "Women" reflected a global shift towards female empowerment in traditionally male-dominated spheres, ensuring a space where women could lead without being overshadowed by men.

AWWA's ethos was encapsulated in its first logo – a gentle hand of a lady reaching out to hold the hand of another in need. Created in Singapore's national colours of red and white, the logo reflected its homegrown origins. Aptly, the slogan "A Helping Hand" was adopted. Everyone was welcome to lend a helping hand to the disadvantaged.

In 1982, Dr Ahmad Mattar, then Minister of Social Affairs, recognised the distinct roles of

government and voluntary societies in the field of social welfare. He noted that the government "entered the field only to operate such residual institutions or services as are not, or cannot conveniently be, established and maintained by voluntary effort alone." This "Many Helping Hands" approach, formally adopted in the 1990s, had already been exemplified by AWWA for over two decades.



Dr Ahmad Mattar's visit to AWWA Community Home for the Aged. (1982)

Planting the Seeds of Change



AWWA volunteer, Mrs Tara Maniar (middle), leading a handicraft-making session with other AWWA volunteers at Mrs Kula's home.

Beyond a \$10 annual membership fee, AWWA had no initial funds and raising money became the organisation's priority. An informal craft group started meeting every Tuesday at Mrs Kula's home to make handicrafts such as embroidered pincushions, doilies, and soft toys that could be sold to raise funds.

To better understand Singapore's social welfare landscape, two speakers were invited to address the members. Mr S.N. Thune, a lecturer of Social Sciences at the University of Singapore, outlined the social welfare setup in Singapore. Mrs Tang See Chim, Executive Director of the Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS), highlighted



Mr S. Rajaratnam at the AWWA inauguration dinner. (1970)

service gaps the organisation could address. Motivated by these insights, the members visited welfare homes, hospitals, and other institutions that were in need of assistance.

AWWA's early contributions included tuition for needy students and financial support for

institutions such as the Tampines Retarded and Spastic Children's Home, which received \$600 to cover a nurse's transport costs. Hearing aids were also provided to two students from the Singapore Association for the Deaf, and informal counselling and coaching were offered to children from disadvantaged families.



Mrs Bhatia (left) with Guest-of-Honour Mr S. Rajaratnam at AWWA's first fundraiser. Mrs Gool Chapkana, the first secretary of AWWA (right), shaking hands with Mrs Rajaratnam. (1970)

In July 1970, AWWA held its first major fundraiser – a Dinner & Dance at the Singapore Island Country Club. With Singapore's first Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr S. Rajaratnam, as the Guest-of-Honour, the event raised nearly \$8,000 – a significant achievement for the fledgling organisation.

AWWA's early efforts did not go unnoticed. Puan Noor Aishah, Singapore's First Lady and AWWA's

patron, lauded the excellent work and called it "a good sign for the future of welfare work in Singapore."

By December 1970, AWWA became affiliated with the SCSS, gaining access to its facilities and further cementing its role in Singapore's social welfare landscape.

Social Club or Charity Organisation?

AWWA quickly became a diverse group, drawing women from various countries and communities. Confronted with the challenge of finding a meeting space, they began gathering at each other's homes.

While social service was foremost on their minds, they had their lighter moments, too. The women regularly organised social get-togethers, fostering camaraderie and serving a practical purpose – boosting membership and raising funds. The women paid for their own transport, and the tea and snacks served at these meetings were homemade, saving every penny for the

welfare fund. Fashion shows, galas, cooking demonstrations, flower arrangement workshops, and talks by guest speakers all contributed to their fundraising efforts.

By the end of its first year, it was evident that AWWA was here to stay. The organisation was primed to grow, push boundaries, and be a catalyst for change in Singapore's social service sector. As Singapore progressed, AWWA was poised to make an indelible mark on Singapore's evolving social service landscape.

2

Supporting Families

CHAPTER TWO

“

When we started, it was (a) general health service. Like Family Service Centres – I give great credit to Mrs Bhatia for that because what the ministry sees now as a very essential thing for society, Mrs Bhatia could see it then, and she said, “We must help the people who are always in difficulty.” And the service started off with general welfare services, where people could come to us for anything.

”

Mrs Kula acknowledging Mrs Bhatia’s foresight and her pivotal role in conceptualising the Family Service Centre.

(From the oral history interview of Mrs Thilliampalam Kulasekaram, Vimalavathy (Mrs) @ Mrs T Kulasekaram (Accession No. 001502, Page No 73 Reel 05), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore)



Volunteers at AWWA Family Service Centre distributing rations. (1970)

Reaching Out, Touching Lives

What began as tentative steps in AWWA's inaugural year gradually transformed into a confident stride, paving the way for the journey it would forge in the years ahead. Small successes served as catalysts for AWWA's imagination and ambition.

In a moment of validation, Mr Othman Wok, then Minister of Social Affairs, lauded AWWA's efforts

by declaring, "Singapore is fortunate to have this association whose members so willingly devote their time, energy, and talents to organising a wide variety of welfare services to help our less fortunate fellow citizens. Its contributions, which help to promote the well-being of the community, are deeply appreciated by the Government."

Family Comes First

In the 1960s, voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) played a vital role in addressing social needs. However, what was missing was a comprehensive and holistic programme that could cater to the well-being of society.

After gaining a deeper understanding of the community's needs, AWWA recognised that families – the cornerstone of a healthy society – were in urgent need of support. It decided to establish a centre where individuals or families in need could seek advice and assistance.

In February 1971, AWWA launched the “General Welfare and Aid Services” (later known as the Family Welfare Service). The approach to this new initiative was simple – AWWA volunteers were available to render support twice a week at the Kalyana Mandapam (also called Govindasamy Pillai Hall and now known as PGP Hall) adjacent to the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Road. People from all walks of life could approach them for help. This social welfare programme thrived under able leadership, primarily addressing issues related to financial hardship, employment, marital issues, and housing challenges.



AWWA Family Service Centre operating from the hall (now known as PGP Hall) adjacent to the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple.

Community Welfare



Distribution of rations at the hall (now known as PGP Hall) adjacent to Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple. (1970)

We have been helping sporadic cases by searching for needy families faced with problems and finding solutions for them. However, we have since February 1971 set up our own Community Welfare Service at Govindasamy Pillai Hall, Serangoon Road functioning regularly two afternoons a week on Wednesdays and Fridays. We are already having referrals being sent to us by other voluntary agencies as well as being approached directly. We need many, many more volunteers from you all to support and assist us in this noble work and to help us get established in this project and promote its growth. Ultimately, the future of the Association depends upon each individual member's effort in trying to make it a success.*

Excerpt from AWWA's 1st Annual Report 1969-1971

(*Also spelt as P. Govindasamy Pillai. The hall was then referred to as the Kalyana Mandapam.)

Case Studies

AWWA's capabilities were evident by how they were able to address complex and varied family needs and dynamics. When a client reported that her husband had sent their two children to beg on the streets, AWWA swiftly intervened and coordinated with the Social Welfare Department, ensuring the children's safety and education.

In another case, a client who faced financial hardship and was on public assistance, had to pay sewerage costs to upgrade to modern sanitation. AWWA's effective case advocacy led to the cost being waived by the Public Utilities Board (PUB).

Their work also extended to family counselling. Through AWWA's guidance, a pregnant woman who was contemplating divorce reconciled with her husband, while another client experiencing financial strain because her adult children lived with her without contributing, was equipped with assertive skills that empowered her to address the situation effectively.

Every case required a unique solution and AWWA was proving itself adept at addressing complex ones.

Prioritising Education

The AWWA Student Welfare Scheme was launched in 1971 as an all-inclusive initiative designed to assist both struggling students and their families. It was also a dedicated project they could call their own. Unlike most scholarships catering to academically proficient students, this scheme focused on students who performed reasonably well in their studies but faced obstacles due to financial difficulties.

Mrs Tambyah, a seasoned social worker, initiated a tuition programme to supplement the education of underprivileged children. Mrs Jaya Anand, who was present at the PGP Hall on Tuesday afternoons, would often step in to provide tuition.

She remembers how AWWA volunteers went the extra mile by observing students' progress, including regular interactions with the teachers, and celebrating their achievements to motivate them further.

Dr Rajan recalls Mrs Bhatia being emphatic that AWWA was not going to be a typical women's social club. "Its members were expected to be hands-on in doing community work, practical in their thinking, and focused on delivering what they promised. The idea was to create an organisation that would look at wider social issues rather than focus only on alleviating poverty. It was a move ahead of its time," she says.

Foreseeing a Social Need

When AWWA launched its tuition classes in the 1970s, it not only met a social need but also provided a service that was a precursor to the tuition services that would later be run by self-help groups like Yayasan MENDAKI and Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA). Two decades before SINDA launched its STEP (SINDA Tutorials for Enhanced Performance) classes, AWWA was already providing highly subsidised tuition for members of the community.

Mrs Guli Ramnani, then Chairman of AWWA General Welfare and Aid services and five-time AWWA President, recalls a significant moment in 1975 when the Social Work Unit of the Ministry of Education (MOE) sent a letter thanking AWWA for their intervention in the case of a student, with the following message included in the letter. "The trouble you took to inform us of his problems has prevented us from having one more school drop-out. The unit looks forward to working more closely with your Association in helping school children." This acknowledgement highlighted the impact of their efforts to ensure no child, youth or student is left behind.

At the 2000 National Day Awards Ceremony, Mrs Ramnani was honoured with the Public Service Medal from then President of Singapore Mr S.R. Nathan, for three decades of service at AWWA.



AWWA Family Service Centre clients with Mrs Guli Ramnani (right).

Improving the Odds

Before the concept of multi-service organisations became mainstream, AWWA's General Welfare and Aid Services was already functioning as a one-stop centre offering referrals, casework, counselling, and more to families. With a focus on community work, the government piloted its first Family Service Centre (FSC) in 1977, seven years after AWWA had initiated the idea.

Minutes of the meetings reveal how seriously the women took their jobs. Detailed records of all beneficiaries were maintained, and decisions were based on genuine need rather than emotional reasons. Case conferences were held to discuss the best possible ways to pool resources and help

clients with varied needs. Follow-ups ensured that families did not experience setbacks. "The Helping Hand" of AWWA was evident in everything that the association did.

Rather than providing direct financial assistance, AWWA volunteers assisted the needy in applying for bursaries and finding employment. Those with medical issues were guided so that they could get the best possible help, promoting self-reliance, and preventing dependency on handouts. Casework and counselling were the mainstay of the FSC, addressing a wide range of issues. This aligned with the government's stance against becoming a welfare state.

Investing in Strong Families

In 1968, then Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew highlighted the correlation between rising population numbers to a potential slowdown in the development of Singapore. AWWA recognised the importance of family planning in breaking the cycle of poverty. Parenting and marriage preparation workshops were conducted, and counsellors were deployed to assist families in making informed choices for their future.

The General Welfare and Aid Services relocated to AWWA's new home at Norris Road in 1987, and was renamed AWWA FSC.

In collaboration with SCSS, later renamed the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), they



Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong (left) and Dr Vasoo, MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC (right), visiting the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged. (1987)



AWWA Family Service Centre at Norris Road.

handled the Rent and Utilities Assistance Scheme (RUAS), helping families become self-reliant and financially independent.

Emeritus Professor Dr Susilan Vasoo, former Member of Parliament and former Director of the SCSS, candidly commented that the programmes and services being run by AWWA were responding

to the needs of the community and “meeting the social service gaps in (the) voluntary sector.” He expressed appreciation for the leadership, referring to it as “responsive to the changes of the external environment” and his confidence that AWWA would address the social challenges that may arise in the future.

New Home, Same Mission

With the expansion of the services offered by AWWA FSC, the Norris Road property that they shared with AWWA School became too small for their ambitions. Moving to a larger, purpose-built centre at the void deck of block 107 of Towner Road in 1997 enabled AWWA to significantly extend its reach and offer community-based services in areas like Bendemeer, Whampoa, Geylang Bahru, Kallang, and Balestier.

At the inauguration of the Towner Road facility on 7 March 1998, Dr Lee Boon Yang, then Minister for Labour, lauded AWWA for its pioneering role in setting up FSCs during the 1980s. He said, "The Government recognises the benefits of FSC. The family is the basic building block of our society. Strong family ties lead to a strong and resilient society. Hence, we will continue to provide funds and assistance for organisations, such as AWWA, to run family support services and programmes."

From Prevention to Intervention

Ms Maureen Fung was with AWWA for 14 years (1994-2008), first as an Executive Director and later as its CEO. She remembers when she first joined, what struck her was how progressive AWWA was and that it was always trying to make its services better. "Giving financial aid to struggling families at the FSC would have been the easy way out," she says. "There was more to it than just money. When we dug deeper, we saw delinquency among the kids, a parent would be serving time in prison, and children were being cared for by elderly grandparents. We realised we had to look at the bigger picture."

In response to changing family dynamics and the rise of stepfamilies, AWWA conducted a survey in 2001, revealing that 11% of FSC clients came from stepfamilies. This led to AWWA FSC initiating and promoting the development of the first-ever Step Family Programme, aligned with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports' goal of supporting stepfamilies and strengthening family bonds by equipping participants with essential parenting skills.



Ms Maureen Fung delivering a speech during Ministry of Education's visit to AWWA Family Service Centre. (2005)

Programmes by AWWA FSC

- The Before & After School Care programme provided care for children and kept them well-engaged while their parents were at work. Services included meals, homework supervision, and indoor and outdoor enrichment classes.
- Targeting youths at risk of delinquency, the Community Youth Outreach programme engaged them in activities that would foster a sense of gratitude and responsibility and hone their leadership skills.
- AWWA supported neighbourhood schools by providing school-based counselling and social awareness sessions on issues ranging from anger management to drugs and smoking, thus, promoting responsible behaviour.
- To equip families with essential life skills, family talks and workshops were held to address stress management, financial literacy, positive parenting, and marriage preparation.
- An annual two-day camp for low-income families provided a space for family bonding through social and recreational activities.

Evolving Societal Needs: FSC, 2010 – present

With time, societal needs evolved, and the landscape of FSC witnessed a shift in focus. The economic crisis of 2008 prompted a change in the service model for FSCs nationwide. They now provide a more centralised, regulated, and subsidised service to prevent families from falling through the cracks. Trained social workers assess, plan, and manage cases to support their clients holistically through any challenges that they may face. They journey with clients through casework and counselling to integrate them back into society and achieve stability.

Explaining the roles of FSCs, Ms See Toh Huixia, Director, AWWA Family Services, says, “Someone who was just diagnosed with dementia would probably have family members who are caregivers; such family members may be facing caregiver

stress. A wife physically abused by her husband and referred to FSC by the Family Justice Court, would have children witnessing the violence at home. Appreciating this person within their environment also allows for the development of a personalised yet more sustainable plan. Our work is not only in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ but also in planting the seed of hope for a better future in the family. Good family functioning will allow for the individual to function better now and build resilience capacity for the future.”

FSCs in Singapore are funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), Community Chest, and Tote Board, and AWWA is no exception. AWWA FSC fundraises for value-added services such as group work sessions and outreach efforts.

Strengthening Families

At AWWA FSC, social workers strive to build rapport and seek out the strengths and resources of families before working with them on their needs. Families are invited to collaborate on case goal settings and to formulate plans, enabling them to foster a sense of ownership and self-reliance through holistic support.

An example of this was evident when AWWA FSC first engaged with Madam L’s family in 2013. The 46-year-old unemployed widow first sought assistance due to financial struggles and

childcare issues. In collaboration with community partners, a comprehensive intervention plan aimed at securing the family’s long-term financial independence and well-being was devised. Safeguards were put in place to ensure her children’s educational challenges were met. Visits from the case worker ensured they continued their path of recovery. The FSC’s unwavering support for Madam L’s family for over a decade underscores the effectiveness of holistic support models to uplift families in vulnerable situations.

Nurturing Resilient Families

The AWWA Ambassadors Programme started in 2015 with a small group of self-motivated individuals keen to help people in their neighbourhood. Through the programme, staff connect the ambassadors to residents who require additional help, and in doing so, help to raise awareness of FSC services.

Over the years, the team realised that on a daily basis, social workers constantly worked with families trying to break out of the poverty cycle. In 2022, AWWA launched the Family Empowerment Programme (FEP). The pilot programme, Singapore's first randomised controlled trial on cash transfers for families facing financial hardship, ran from May 2022 to October 2023 with the support of technical advisors, Tri-Sector

Associates, and funders Standard Chartered Bank and Temasek Foundation. By the end of the programme, 60% of participants who received the cash were classified "well" in terms of their level of psychological distress, compared with 36% from those in the control group. Additionally, 27% of participants reported better job security than before, higher than 15% of those in the control group. 57% also reported that they had better training and advancement opportunities in their current jobs because of the FEP. By the end of the pilot, it was evident that the cash transfers provided families from lower-income households with the bandwidth and flexibility to address immediate needs while helping them plan for, and achieve better financial and mental stability in the long run.



Panel discussion during the launch of the Family Empowerment Programme report in 2024. (From left to right) Dr Prassanna Raman (Lead, Impact and Special Projects, AWWA), Dr Ng Kok Hoe (Senior Research Fellow, NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy), Ms See Toh Huixia (Director, Family Services, AWWA), Ms Cindy Ng-Tay (Director, Melrose Home, Children's Aid Society), and Mr Kevin Tan (CEO, Tri-Sector Associates).



Art jamming at AWWA's Transitional Shelter with its clients.

Going Beyond

AWWA's experience in supporting families was evident with its participation in the MSF's Strengthening Families Together initiative in 2014. This programme enhanced AWWA's understanding of systemic approaches to aiding families in crisis, which proved invaluable when managing the complex needs of displaced families. To address the growing need for family-focused housing solutions, AWWA began operating its first Transitional Shelter (TS) at Lengkok Bahru in

2018. These shelters provide temporary housing for families experiencing homelessness, along with social work interventions to address their challenges and achieve long-term stability. AWWA expanded its services with a second shelter at Jalan Tenteram in 2022. Since 2018, both shelters have supported over 200 family units. In 2019, AWWA commissioned the Pathways to Homelessness study, shedding light on the challenges that lead families to homelessness.

Transitional Shelters: Reimagining Possibilities

The AWWA TS units are nestled within Housing & Development Board (HDB) blocks, seamlessly integrating their clients with other flat dwellers. The facility at Lengkok Bahru offers co-sharing spaces in three-room flats, while those at Jalan Tenteram are two-room units. As these flats are not meant to be a permanent abode, they are fitted with basic amenities. The shelters aim to provide solace to families facing housing insecurity and offer them an opportunity to regain their

footing. Once a family is referred to the shelter, a comprehensive needs assessment is conducted to determine the level of support required. Subsequently, two teams are assigned to serve the families, providing shelter management and intervention, respectively. The long-term goals are to help these families achieve stable housing, financial stability, and even employment, among others.



One of AWWA's Transitional Shelter units.

Support Provided by Transitional Shelter



Community engagement

Encouraging discharged families to return as AWWA Ambassadors to volunteer and support others.



Educational continuity

Ensuring children aged 4-17 years attend school regularly..



Emotional resilience

Providing activities and programmes to enhance the emotional well-being of children and youth.



Employment support

Helping families find stable employment and bolster their income.



Housing stability

Assisting families in transitioning to rental or permanent homes.



Social work intervention

Addressing the underlying reasons for homelessness through casework and counselling support.



Temporary accommodation

Offering short-term housing to those who have exhausted all other options.

Providing a Second Chance in Life

AWWA's focus extends beyond immediate needs and strives to work towards breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness at a grassroots level. The families find comfort in knowing they are not alone. Monthly welfare checks are conducted to make sure these families are doing well in the shelter. Additionally, AWWA provides post-discharge support to ensure clients do not fall back into a troubling situation again.

While providing a roof over a family's head is crucial, it is not a solution to the problem. Casework and counselling remain the core of the programme. To further enhance support, AWWA regularly runs the Family Empowerment and Bonding Programmes to bring families together to celebrate successes, support, motivate, and inspire each other.



A social worker connecting with clients from an AWWA Transitional Shelter.

Dignity and a Sense of Self-Worth

Janny, a Thai national, accompanied by her 8-year-old Singaporean son, came to AWWA TS in 2019. Estranged from her Singaporean husband, she was homeless and unemployed. AWWA TS played a pivotal role in facilitating her transition to her current HDB rental accommodation and assisting her with the application process. With her son settled in a secondary school, Janny is gainfully employed at a Thai food restaurant. She regards AWWA TS as a place of kindness, safety, and support where she can freely confide in others and looks forward to returning to AWWA TS as a volunteer and sharing her story with the hope to inspire and support others facing similar challenges.

Supporting the Unsung Heroes: Our Caregivers

Family caregiving is an often unseen, unacknowledged, and undervalued responsibility. It is a demanding and challenging job, frequently leading to caregiver burnout. Eager to provide adequate support for caregivers, a working committee was formed in May 2004, under the leadership of Mrs Pearl Goh, to look into setting up a Caregivers Training Centre (CTC) in AWWA. In July of the same year, NCSS announced plans for enhanced community-based caregiver support and professional training programmes.

Initially focused on parents of children with autism, the CTC, in collaboration with AWWA Educational Services, conducted programmes to enable parents to be effective caregivers at home. In-house training was provided for AWWA staff and volunteers to enhance their capabilities as trainers. In April 2006, CTC became the AWWA Centre for Caregivers (CFC), the nation's first dedicated centre to support caregivers in need. It went on to serve over 37,000 caregivers over ten years, with Mrs Goh serving as Chairperson of the CFC Committee.



Physiotherapy room at the AWWA Caregivers Training Centre.

The CFC Journey: Empowering Caregivers

2006

Establishment of CFC to provide comprehensive support and training to caregivers.

2007

Institution of the Model Caregiver Awards. This year also saw then Speaker of Parliament Mr Abdullah Tarmugi announce two new government initiatives, the Caregivers Training Grant, and Foreign Domestic Worker Levy Concession, at the AWWA Caregivers fair to provide additional support to caregivers.



Singapore National Caregiving Conference 2010.

2008

Release of a “first-of-its-kind” caregivers’ handbook by CFC. From 2011, it was available in Mandarin as well.

2009

Launch of the Caregivers Education & Support Programme, offering psychosocial training for family caregivers.

2010

Hosted the first Singapore National Caregiving Conference, with support from the Centre for Enabled Living (CEL), Health Promotion Board, and Tote Board.

2012

Introduced care talks to train volunteers and professionals as caregiving ambassadors in partnership with CEL to enhance public awareness. A service desk was set up at the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) Service Hub to handle enquiries.

2013-2014

Launched CaregiversConnect.sg, a community-support network for caregivers, and initiated a national study to understand public perception of caregiving services to improve the programme.

2016

AWWA was one of four social service agencies roped in by AIC to pilot the Caregiver Service (Disability) and Caregiver Service (Seniors) programmes.

AWWA Caregiver Service (Disability)

From 2016 to 2018, AWWA piloted the Caregiver Service (Disability) or CS (D) programme, supported by the Tote Board – Enabling Lives Initiative Grant. With close to 700 participants and nearly 400 volunteers, the programme provided caregivers of persons with disabilities with much-needed socio-emotional, transitional, and respite support.

Caregivers often face the greatest challenges during key transitions, such as when their loved ones graduate from special education (SPED) schools but cannot access post-18 services such as supported employment, sheltered workshops, adult disability homes or day activity centres. Recognising caregiving as a lifelong journey, CS (D) took a holistic approach to meet caregivers' needs across life stages, especially those at risk of isolation.

Through needs assessments, case management, counselling, and a robust care network, the programme supported over 300 caregiving families, many of whom faced moderate to high stress levels. The initiative offered caregivers opportunities to recharge while ensuring they received comprehensive support. CS (D) was sunset as a standalone programme, and caregiver support has since been embedded across all of AWWA's disability services.



Caregivers at a networking session.

Helping Caregivers Find a Voice

In 2017, AWWA started a mindfulness group called “Mindful Me!” to support caregivers. The group aims to share mindfulness practices to help caregivers cope with the challenges of taking care of aged relatives with additional needs and mental health challenges. Between 2017 and 2022, 89% of participants reported that they experienced an improvement in life satisfaction after the group sessions, and 66% of caregivers experienced a reduction in stress.

When more mental health challenges arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, Project Sunshine

ramped up efforts to instill hope and build togetherness through online talks, in-person workshops, a caregiver stress checklist, and self-help tools.

Today, 55 years later, AWWA’s support for families and caregivers continues to be strong and multi-faceted. In 2017, caregiver support was embedded as a core component of all AWWA services, and CFC ceased to be a standalone service. Today, FSC serves over 650 family units annually, while both shelters support over 80 displaced families each year.

3

Health and Senior Care

CHAPTER THREE

“Week after week, as I walk down the corridors, I am greeted with looks of gratitude, affectionate smiles, spontaneous hugs, warm embraces and loving pecks on my cheeks. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity that came my way to serve for I believe ‘It is the giver who has to be thankful and not the receiver’.”

Founding Member of AWWA, Mrs Kula, referring to the AWWA Senior Community Home.

(Excerpt from Mrs Kula's message during the 25th anniversary of AWWA Community Home for Senior Citizens).

From Isolation to Inclusion

On any given day, block 123 at Ang Mo Kio Avenue 6 buzzes with activity. The residents leisurely go about their daily chores. Others chat animatedly in the void deck or make their way to the nearest hawker centre for coffee. They can independently access leisure activities, healthcare facilities, and have opportunities to socialise. The residents of AWWA Senior Community Home (SCH) live together as one big family within a supportive and inclusive programme that has been in place since 1976.

In the 1970s, institutional care for seniors was a novel concept in Asia, and Singapore was no exception. The government was keen that, as far as possible, seniors should remain integrated within the community rather than isolated in institutional homes. SCSS had already pioneered a home for ambulant residents and was on the

lookout for partners who could take on more such programmes. Not one to step back from a challenge, Mrs Tambyah and Mrs Kula were confident of AWWA's capabilities. When asked what inspired them to participate in an initiative like this, Mrs Kula's simple response was, "How could we refuse?"

However, not everyone was immediately supportive. It was expected that the monthly running cost of the home would be \$1,500 – a relatively large amount in the 1970s. Their first breakthrough came when AWWA member, Mrs Kavita Chanrai, offered a personal donation of \$10,000 towards the home. The ladies always had faith in themselves, but now they felt confident that, if the need arose, their vision would receive support of the community, and they decided to charge on.



Residents of AWWA SCH enjoying a game of Rummikub.



Residents at the AWWA Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged. (1979)

Getting Down to Brass Tacks

In 1976, AWWA members planned, organised, and worked towards their latest project – the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged. It was a labour of love, one which saw this dedicated bunch of ladies, “unstintingly give much of their time, scrubbing floors, painting, raising the much-needed funds”, as quoted in an excerpt from AWWA’s Annual Report 1976-77. In 1976, HDB allocated to them the entire first floor of block 228, comprising 12 one-room flats which was sufficient to house 40 residents in shared spaces.

The Home provided “sheltered housing” for the underprivileged seniors to live independently within a “group living” concept.

The Association’s members meticulously sifted through applications, visiting applicants at kampungs to assess their eligibility for admission, and simultaneously planning fundraising events. They sent prospective residents for medical evaluation and scrutinised their family and financial situation. Even at the start, they were

worried about what would happen to the residents once they were unwell or non-ambulatory. Simple things such as installing a gate at the end of the corridors to prevent strangers from entering required attention. Equally important was the solemn task of coordinating with a casket company to ensure residents received a dignified send-off when needed, along with arranging for a designated doctor to sign death certificates. By the end of 1977, an approval had been obtained to designate the Home as an Institute of Public Character.

Building on the success of the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged, AWWA launched a day care scheme for seniors. This initiative allowed working couples to leave their senior family members in capable hands during the day at a nominal cost of \$1. This programme not only provided relief to caregivers, but also ensured

that seniors received continuous care and social interaction.

Around this time, SCSS had initiated a pilot scheme to house seniors who were not eligible for institutional care but could afford to pay a modest fee of \$20 to \$50 covering flat rental fees, utilities and basic furnishings. Again, AWWA stepped up and took on the responsibility of running this “hostel” in conjunction with SCSS. Conveniently located on the same floor as the Home, it enabled AWWA to seamlessly extend care to more seniors in need.

This aligned with the government’s belief that social welfare policies should focus on working with the people, rather than simply working for them. In this way, AWWA has become a role model for other charity associations.



Interviewing a potential resident of the Community Home for the Aged.

Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged



Official opening of the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged by then Minister of Social Affairs Encik Othman Wok. (1977)

The Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged was ready to welcome its first resident on 14 January 1977. At its inauguration, then Minister of Social Affairs Encik Othman Wok had nothing but praise for AWWA, and during his speech, mentioned, "I am glad to note that the Asian Women's Welfare Association has heeded the call for voluntary bodies to cooperate with Government in the provision of welfare services particularly for the aged. The association has now embarked upon the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged project, and this is the tangible result of its concern for old people. The Association has managed to garner the support of the public and tap the generosity of the business houses to assist in setting up this Home."

"Many other associations and societies would do well to emulate the example of the Asian Women's Welfare Association. The Ministry of Social Affairs has called upon mutual benefit organisations to concentrate on providing services for the living rather than the dead."

"In the Ang Mo Kio Home, Government provides Public Assistance allowances and the Asian Women's Welfare Association provides management and other financing. This sort of combination of Government and voluntary efforts can make for a reasonably good balance in meeting the welfare needs in Singapore, not only in the care of the aged, but also in other fields of social service as well."

Creating a Home Away From Home

Ms Maureen Fung, then AWWA CEO, recalls that it was the simple pleasures that touched the residents' hearts. "Home-cooked meals were particularly appreciated and enjoyed. The residents never felt they were living in a facility. For a start, they didn't wear uniforms but dressed in

their own clothes, emphasising their individuality and dignity. They could decorate their rooms as they wished. It was not just the independence but the genuine care, concern, and respect with which they were treated that kept the seniors content, healthy and fulfilled," she explains.



Residents enjoying a dance session at the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged.

The Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre: Working Hand in Hand with the Government

In 1979, the SCSS, together with three affiliates, including AWWA, initiated the Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre. Dr S. Vasoo, who was closely involved with the project, explained that this pioneering initiative aimed to support residents transitioning from kampungs to high-rise flats in Ang Mo Kio. "There were very few services available to families in the housing estates. Many of the residents were retired construction workers and Samsui women. AWWA provided them with social assistance, financial grants, rations, and a befriending service," he elaborated.

Their inaugural programme, the Elders Friendship Club, aimed to combat loneliness and isolation among the seniors while nurturing confidence and self-esteem. The programme served as a vehicle

for educating the community to understand the needs of these residents.

Mrs Anand, who managed the Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre until it became an independent entity in 1986, recalls that "being part of running the day-to-day activities of the Centre provided AWWA invaluable insight into the government's vision for social services in Singapore, an understanding of the ground reality and the confidence to take on larger projects. They were then able to apply this learning to improve their services at the Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre and Home for the Elderly". The same year, Mrs Anand received the Public Service Medal for her unwavering commitment to social and community services.

The Move to Block 123

After 11 years of operations, the HDB block where the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged was located was slated for demolition in 1987. AWWA was offered block 123 in Ang Mo Kio as a replacement, with assurances that this move

would be long-term. True to that promise, block 123 continues to serve as the Home's location to this day. Reflecting the evolving times, it is now known as the Senior Community Home (SCH).



AWWA Senior Community Home at block 123 Ang Mo Kio Avenue 6.



Mr Lim Hng Kiang (middle) touring the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for the Aged with Mrs Vijayah Ponnusamy, Senior Case Worker at the Home (left), Mrs Nimmi Handa, then President of AWWA, (second from right) and Mrs Kula (right) during the Home's 20th anniversary. (1996)

A Remarkable Transformation

The SCH marked a significant milestone when in 1996, it celebrated two decades of service to the community. Mr Lim Hng Kiang, then Minister for National Development and the Guest-of-Honour at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Home, praised SCH as a “model home” and commended

the staff for their innovative approach to elder care which he described as a “home within a home”. Two elderly couples had even found love at the Home and married, providing companionship to each other as they aged.

A Heart-Warming Legacy



Mr Singan Muniandy (in yellow t-shirt) with fellow residents at the Home.

Among the many touching stories from the Home, Mr Singan Muniandy's stands out for its generosity. A lottery ticket that he bought won him a staggering \$400,000. A grateful and overwhelmed Mr Muniandy gave \$100,000 from his winnings to AWWA. In recognition of his gift, the conference room at Norris Road was named after him. There have been other cases as well when residents have donated their modest savings to AWWA in gratitude for giving them a happy home.

For Ms Connie Lim, the AWWA SCH has been a sanctuary for nearly 30 years. Now in her nineties, Ms Lim continues to maintain her independence by handling her daily tasks without help. The staff fondly remember the delicious mee goreng and sweet and sour fish that she would prepare for them in the past. Her heartfelt wish "is to die at the Home and never have to move to a nursing home", reflecting her deep connection to the place and its people.

"It's important to be light-hearted, not to worry or think too much," advises Madam Ong Sai Bay who, with her husband, was one of the earliest couples to be referred to the Home in 2009. Her husband has since moved to a nursing home, but Madam Ong keeps her spirits up by going out to shop or to the coffee shop with her friends. "I feel a sense of belonging here," says the amiable 81-year-old, whose favourite activity is doing Zumba with a volunteer instructor.



AWWA senior residents on an outing to Bollywood Farms with volunteers from Direct Life Foundation.



AWWA senior clients making terrariums with volunteers from OCBC.

Reimagining Care: AWWA's Journey

Over the years, operations within the Home have evolved. Residents are now referred to AWWA by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC). Once they become part of AWWA SCH, efforts are made to keep them within the Home's familiar environment for as long as it is medically feasible. Corporate and community partners organise meaningful and exciting events for the seniors, including social outings and festive celebrations.

As residents age, their needs evolve, too. With time, the demand for more intensive medical services has grown, putting a strain on both the financial and human resources of the Home. In a beautiful synergy, different services under AWWA Health and Senior Care (HSC), of which the SCH is also a part, support each other and the residents through various stages of ageing.

Committed to Caring

At AWWA SCH, the dedication and passion of our staff has been pivotal in shaping and nurturing an environment that the residents cherish. Over the years, key members of the team have grown alongside the institution, forming deep bonds with residents.

Mrs Susila Devi, Admin Executive, has been with AWWA since 1989 and works closely with the team in managing the Home's daily operations. She has always worked behind the scenes to ensure the supplies at the Home are readily available to the residents. Having been a familiar face to residents for over three decades, her warm smile is a source of comfort, and seniors feel at ease confiding in her.



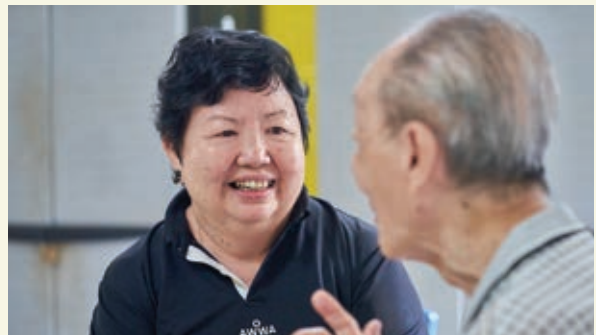
Mrs Susila Devi (left) with Mrs Tambyah.



Mrs Vijayah Ponnusamy

Mrs Vijayah Ponnusamy, a Senior Case Worker, started her journey as a Supervisor at the Home in 1985, and has witnessed its remarkable growth over the last 40 years. Even after all these years, Mrs Ponnusamy's eyes well up, as she recalls some of the cases she has handled. To her, they were real people who often looked upon her as their daughter. It remains heart-breaking to transfer them to a nursing home or hospice care, knowing that it may be the last time she sees them.

Ms Karen Choong, Senior Programme Executive, supports the day-to-day programmes of the Home. Serving the residents for over 25 years has given her a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment in her work. Residents respect and love her as their own. During her spare time, she engages with them and provides companionship. At times, Ms Choong's family complains that AWWA is her real home!



Ms Karen Choong speaking to one of the residents.

The family is the first line of support for the elderly members. But not everyone is fortunate to have a family to fall back on. For these elderly without any family support, they need help from the community. Facilities such as SCH play a very important role in helping this group of elderly remain an integral part of our society.

Message from Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, then Minister for Community Development and Sports in 2001, at the Home's 25th anniversary.



"Another important part of being a community of all ages is a community that supports each other and here, AWWA plays an important role. It has been here nearly 40 years. Through their Community Home, Senior Activity Centre and through their READYCARE day rehabilitative centre, they have helped to look after 500 seniors and their families, and they are a very precious asset to Ang Mo Kio."

Excerpt from then Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the AWWA Elderly Services Open House on 17 January 2014.

Building a Village of Care for Seniors

Over the years, AWWA has evolved, diversified, and grown without compromising its core philosophy of lending a helping hand to those in need. A Ministerial Committee set up in 2007 recommended ageing in place as Singapore's preferred approach to long-term care. As Singapore's population ages, bridging the health and social sectors is essential to delivering comprehensive and holistic care at all levels of

society, including seniors, so that they may lead independent, dignified, and fulfilling lives.

The AWWA Village is a perfect showcase for the social service agency. As of 2024, the service boundary of AWWA Village spanned 34 HDB blocks, two condominiums, and a private estate, providing continual, comprehensive care to thousands of seniors living in the neighbourhood.

Active Ageing is Healthy Ageing

Many seniors in the neighbourhood surrounding AWWA SCH lived in isolation. With the belief that they would benefit from being active members of a supportive community, AWWA established a Senior Activity Centre (SAC) at the void deck of block 123 in Ang Mo Kio in 1997.

SAC has evolved into what is now known as the Active Ageing Centre (AAC) and in 2022,

celebrated 25 years of service to society. Keeping in mind the evolving needs and changing policies, the SAC model does proactive outreach to build a rapport with the clients and eventually earn their trust. AAC is a one-stop facility where seniors can access resources to improve their overall health, aligning with Singapore's focus on preventive care to keep people healthy.

Our seniors (almost 200 of them) are entrenched and forced to battle three major problems – neglect, boredom, and loneliness. The main objective of SAC is to solve these problems by providing them with a place for the lonely elderly to come and interact and to provide amenities for them to spend their time usefully and happily. I can boldly say that the Centre has achieved this.

Mrs Kula



Seniors exercising at AWWA Active Ageing Centre.

The centre features programmes such as physical exercises, gaming, karaoke, festive celebrations, and handicraft interest groups. Items made by the seniors are sold to generate funds used in AAC's programmes. Some are trained as Centre

Ambassadors to run centre-based activities, including conducting exercises, setting up logistics for various programmes, making and serving refreshments for seniors, and sanitising centre equipment.



Handicraft session at AWWA Active Ageing Centre.

A touching story from the AAC involves Madam Ho and her husband, Mr Wong, who were active members for over 20 years. Now a widower in his nineties, Mr Wong continues to live independently and happily in an environment where he has lived

most of his life. He frequents the AAC for his regular dose of newspaper reading and receives day care services from the AWWA Rehab and Day Care Centre (RDCC).

Collaborating Cohesively Under Community of Care (CoC)

In line with Singapore's many helping hands approach, AWWA's CoC programme that is offered through AAC brings together several partners to support its clients. It has joined hands with Tan Tock Seng Hospital, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, the Agency for Integrated Care-Silver Generation Office and general practitioners, including PanCare Medical Clinic, to ensure that clients can journey with AWWA as they age. This CoC affords timely care and intervention beyond hospital walls and supports the principle of ageing in place.

Staff and volunteers visit homes to get to know the seniors, inviting them to AAC and connecting them to internal services or external service providers. The aim is to have every senior in the AWWA Village supported by a personalised care plan co-designed by seniors with all relevant stakeholders.

The CoC thus serves as a model of collaborative care. It reflects AWWA's commitment to supporting seniors in being empowered to manage their health and enjoy their golden years living comfortably in their homes with optimal health and independence.



Then President of Singapore Mr Ong Teng Cheong (middle) with Ms Maureen Fung (left) at AWWA READYCARE Centre. (1999)



AWWA staff speaking with a senior resident.

Rehab & Day Care Centre (RDCC)

Launched in 1998 as AWWA READYCARE Centre, AWWA RDCC was officially inaugurated the following year by then President of Singapore Mr Ong Teng Cheong to coincide with the United Nations (UN) International Year of Older Persons. He lauded AWWA for “keeping its ears constantly to the ground and meeting the challenges of the current and future needs.”

RDCC supports adults and seniors with functional impairments in their recovery and empowers them to lead a meaningful life. Physiotherapy,

occupational therapy, and speech therapy services are provided in both centre-based and home-based settings to improve or maintain functional status and optimise health. A nurturing day care environment fosters physical, mental and social well-being, promoting a sense of belonging and purpose for clients who require custodial care during the day. Clients and caregivers are supported through care coordination, facilitating access to financial assistance, and providing psychosocial support.



Therapy session for a senior client with an AWWA therapist (left). A Gym Tonic session conducted by an AWWA therapist for a senior client (right).

Today, RDCC has evolved to include chronic disease management and health-promoting initiatives, aligning with national efforts towards preventive health. One example is the Air Master service, which was launched in 2023 in collaboration with Tan Tock Seng Hospital and the Lien Foundation. This cardiopulmonary rehabilitation programme empowers individuals

with chronic non-cancer lung diseases and cardiac conditions to manage their health through exercise, sharing coping strategies, and building a supportive peer community. RDCC also runs the Gym Tonic programme, an initiative also by the Lien Foundation, to help seniors in Ang Mo Kio become stronger, fitter and happier.

Expanding Home-Based Care

Launched in April 2014, Personal Care Service Seniors (PCSS) was initially supported by the MSF to assist individuals with additional needs who had limited or no caregiving support and were confined to their homes. The programme aimed to prolong the ability of the clients to stay integrated within the community and provide caregivers with respite.

By 2018, the programme expanded to include both adults with additional needs and low-income seniors aged 60 and above who have

little or no caregiver support. This enhancement aimed to provide better support for individuals across different life stages and was placed under the purview of the Ministry of Health (MOH). Trained Home Personal Care Service (HPCS) personnel provide intervention to assist clients with personal care, housekeeping, medication reminder services, and maintenance exercise plans in a bid to delay the deterioration of their clients' health. Grocery shopping and mentally stimulating activities like outings and interest groups are also actively planned.



An AWWA therapist guiding a client during a Home Personal Care Service session.



Coffeshop setting at AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre @ Yishun.

Lost & Found: Navigating the Reality of Dementia

The idea for a dedicated Dementia Day Care Centre (DDCC) emerged in 2010 when AWWA partnered with the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) to train staff in assessing and identifying clients with signs of depression or dementia, ensuring they could benefit from effective care programmes. AWWA launched its first DDCC in Ang Mo Kio in 2015, followed by a second centre in Yishun in 2018, supporting AIC's initiative to make Singapore a dementia-friendly nation.

Both centres offer professional care to seniors through various mind and body-stimulating

activities. Since familiar environments often act as cues to draw out memories from the subconscious, an area at Yishun is set up like a coffeshop to make the clients feel at home.

Volunteer hairdressers also come in to groom them and enhance their self-image. Activities like chair yoga and workshops for hands-on activities like terrarium making and music therapy are very popular at both DDCCs, and a volunteer artist works actively with the seniors to create unique artwork and pieces that have been part of a public roving exhibition.

In 2015, then Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong officiated the opening of AWWA's Dementia Day Care Centre @ Ang Mo Kio (DDCCA) at block 123. In his speech, he noted that the centre aligned with the government's desire to upgrade the neighbourhood so that Ang Mo Kio would "remain a community for all ages". AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre @ Yishun (DDCCY) was inaugurated by former President of Singapore Madam Halimah Yacob in 2018.



Initially, Madam Low, a DDCC client, had limited opportunities for cognitive stimulation and socialisation while she was living at home with a highly stressed caregiver. The team at DDCCY adopted a person-centred care approach and explored ways to engage her meaningfully. Madam Low now assists in meal preparation and participates actively in baking sessions while always wearing a smile on her face.

Centre-based nursing services are also provided by DDCCA, and staff support seniors to receive packed medications, or undertake medical intervention like nasogastric tube insertions, catheter changes or dressing for minor wounds, alleviating the need to go to clinics or hospitals for nursing procedures.



Seniors playing the ukulele at AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre @ Yishun.

Expanding the Horizons of Dementia Care through Community Partnerships

To encourage clients to be more active in the community beyond the confines of the centre, DDCC launched a multi-pronged pilot Care Beyond Walls (CBW) in 2020, with the support of the Lien Foundation. The programme adopts a community integration model where clients are socially prescribed with outdoor activities as part of their individualised care plans, including volunteering roles.

Within a span of four years, CBW connected 90 seniors with 12 host organisations and 300 community partners. Together, the seniors contributed to over 780 volunteering hours, forging meaningful connections and fostering stronger community bonds.

Through CBW, DDCCY partnered with the Sree Narayana Mission for the seniors to do weekly gardening at their therapeutic garden. The residents of the Mission, in turn, visited

DDCCY during festivals like Deepavali and Christmas.

DDCC seniors also collaborated with community partners on activities that promote intergenerational learning. For example, they worked with students from Elias Park Primary School as part of the school's eco-stewardship programme to maintain a vegetable farm.

At Jamiyah Childcare Centre, seniors conduct storytelling sessions alongside preschool teachers to support early literacy, while also guiding preschoolers to water plants in the AWWA Community Garden. The garden, maintained by AWWA SCH residents, is located between block 123 Ang Mo Kio and block 124 Ang Mo Kio, where Jamiyah Childcare Centre is located. Through these activities, seniors not only share their skills and experiences but also nurture a love for nature and build lasting connections across generations.



A senior client conducting a storytelling session to children from Jamiyah Childcare Centre.

Home is Where the Community is

By supporting seniors to age at home, Integrated Home & Day Care Centre (IHDC) takes away some pressure on long-term care facilities by offering an all-in-one service for seniors. AWWA had been involved in the pilot project of IHDC and, in 2016, was commissioned to be a service provider.

IHDC gives AWWA the flexibility to deliver varied programmes and strengthen its services at their AWWA Village. The different groups under the AWWA HSC suites of services work in tandem to provide day care services at the centre, rehab exercises, nursing care, or home-based services in clients' homes. Staff also go to clients' homes

to help them with daily activities like showering, playing games to keep them mentally agile, delivering meals, and escorting clients to medical appointments while the caregivers get some respite.

IHDC supports the well-being of caregivers, thus providing for the clinical, medical, and psycho-emotional needs of the community. Additionally, to better reflect the gamut of services offered, AWWA Elderly Services was rebranded as HSC in 2016 and was positioned as a community health and social care service provider to serve the needs of Singapore's rapidly ageing population.

We Are Not Alone

With the belief that there is no health without mental health, AWWA has integrated community mental health programmes into HSC since 2017. These are in line with the Community Mental Health (CMH) Masterplan developed by the AIC and referred to as CREST (Community Resource Engagement and Support Team).

CREST is a first mental health touchpoint for members of the public who require mental health support. CREST focuses on raising public awareness of mental health conditions and dementia, promotes early recognition of at-risk individuals, and provides emotional support

to individuals and their caregivers. It also links individuals to relevant health and social care services when necessary. Not one to shy away from advocacy, AWWA continues to encourage timely diagnosis and collaborates with other AWWA services to support clients with dementia or other mental conditions, as well as their caregivers. Once the staff of AWWA AAC identifies clients displaying signs of mental decline, they refer the seniors to CREST for mood and memory screening. Together, the AAC and CREST teams collaborate to deliver comprehensive support to clients.



Community café at Kampung AWWA.

Kampung AWWA: A Modern Take on the Traditional Community Spirit

If the name evokes memories of an attap-roofed space on stilts, you are in for a surprise! Built in 2023, Kampung AWWA (KA), located at the void deck of block 130 in Ang Mo Kio, is a brightly lit, intergenerational space that is open to all to promote healthy social integration. Comfortable chairs are provided, along with access to digital

and physical newspapers, magazines, and video games. A bi-monthly bazaar is organised, where one can buy handicrafts and other items made by the seniors and residents. The kampung spirit of “gotong royong” (Malay for mutual help and service) can be found here in full measure as the seniors care for and support each other.

KA is an integrated three-in-one social space for all ages and consists of a gym that provides Gym Tonic sessions, a resource centre for caregivers, and a communal space for socialising. A community café sees senior volunteers take on

roles as enthusiastic baristas serving tea or coffee on request, with the adoption of a pay-as-you-wish model for each order. Funds received are pooled as donations that go towards supporting the running costs of KA.

Supporting the Individual Through Collective Effort

Many of the clients in AWWA Village are active, but no one can deny that with every passing day, they are ageing. As time passes, their health may deteriorate. Along with this, their physical strength and cognitive abilities may gradually decline. They initially need physiotherapy and primary medical care, and as they grow older, many are faced with a gamut of health and mobility issues, making it difficult to manage on their own.

Madam Sarah's story is a testament to the transformative power of collaborative partnerships. Her journey with AWWA began when she grappled with a decline in her health. AWWA's care team delivered in-home personal care, centre-based nursing services, and CREST

mental health outreach services. A network of neighbours regularly checked in on her well-being, offering companionship, and emotional support. Eventually, Madam Sarah not only adapted to her medical routine but also gained a positive outlook as she gained more confidence in managing her health. She found a renewed sense of purpose by staying active and volunteering at AAC and the neighbourhood Community Centre. After close to 40 years of running services to support seniors in ageing well, AWWA continues to work towards paving the way for a more inclusive society where the aged are not limited to growing old in isolation.

4

Children and Youth Disability

CHAPTER FOUR

“

These are multiply disabled children, some of whom are also intellectually disabled. But one of the joys of my life, I think, is that though our school is at the bottom rung of the ladder of education, we have given an opportunity of education to children who nobody wanted to touch.

”

Mrs Tambyah, Founder of AWWA Handicapped Children's Playgroup.

From a Playgroup to Singapore's Pioneer School for Multiple Disabilities

In the 1970s, several organisations were caring for children with additional needs, but each focused on a single disability. Due to a lack of awareness and understanding, children with additional needs were sometimes ostracised. These children were generally considered uneducable, leaving their families, especially the mothers, to shoulder the responsibilities of caregiving without adequate support or guidance.

AWWA has always sought ways to advocate for positive change in society. The year 1979 was designated as the International Year of the Child, and AWWA wanted to commemorate it with a project that was not only impactful but sustainable too.



A physiotherapy session conducted at St James' Church.

The Handicapped Children's Playgroup was Mrs Tambyah's idea, germinating from a desire to provide therapy and teaching for children with multiple additional needs.

Navigating a Novel Course

Under Mrs Tambyah's leadership, AWWA volunteers reached out to the paediatric department at the Singapore General Hospital, and from their waiting list, identified and assessed children with multiple disabilities who would benefit from the programme they had in mind.

With seven children shortlisted but no place to go, AWWA grabbed the offer to use a space at the Church of St. Ignatius on King's Road. The challenges of inadequate work and storage

spaces, together with the need to transport equipment back and forth each week did not deter the volunteers.

The Playgroup was inaugurated on 12 March 1979, and operated weekly from 2 to 5 pm. Educational toys, an inflatable paddling pool, pillows, and mats were either purchased or donated by members. With their dedication and genuine concern for the welfare of the children, the volunteers soon won over the hearts of mothers.



The Playgroup holds its first session in the hall of the Church of St. Ignatius.

One of the volunteers, Mrs Doris Loh, generously donated \$30,000 towards a van that would serve both the Playgroup and the Ang Mo Kio Community Home for Senior Citizens. Mrs Isabel D' Costa, volunteered to be, among other things, the "van attendant". It was a paid service for those who could afford it, while for others, it was free. Families not on the van route were reimbursed taxi fare or ferried by volunteers, to ensure they did not miss their weekly sessions.

Within a few months, the Playgroup moved to Maris Stella Kindergarten at Holland Road, where they had some verandah space and a tiny storage area under the stairs. Mrs Nancy Ng offered the

use of her swimming pool for hydrotherapy sessions. "It was no imposition at all," she recalls. "I wanted to do my bit to help the children too, and being in the pool helped them exercise their muscles while having fun playtime."

Additional support arrived in the form of Mrs Dennis Broux and Mrs Kay Clarke, the Playgroup's first volunteer physiotherapists. Mrs Sumitra Kesavan was hired as a Welfare Assistant. In 1981, they moved for the third time in as many years to St James' Church at Leedon Road. This move allowed them more space so they could afford to buy additional physiotherapy equipment for the children.

A Win-Win Situation

Mrs Sandra Berrick, former Chairman of the Playgroup and Principal of AWWA's first Special School, which is also Singapore's first school for youths with physical and/or multiple disabilities, affirms that the Playgroup sought to benefit children and provide a support network for mothers. For Mrs Tambyah, the purpose of the Playgroup "was to give the parents a glimmer of hope and to demonstrate to them that we valued their children. We also wanted the mothers to know that we understood their heartaches and their need to interact with mums in similar circumstances". Every Christmas, not only did the children receive gifts, but their mothers, who were tireless caregivers, also did.

Given the one-on-one support each child required, the financial demands were substantial. The launch of the Community Chest in 1983 eased the burden of fundraising for social service organisations, allowing them to focus on the causes they espoused. Volunteers stepped in to fill the gaps. They visited the children at home, offered advice on improvements that could be made in their living conditions, often accompanying them for doctor's visits, and helped when parents were occupied or unable to afford medical consultations. This not only eased the parents' load but also reinforced the message that differently-abled children deserved community support and that AWWA was committed to providing it.

At a time when no other institution would take him because of severe cerebral palsy, Peter Koh, now 61, was accepted in the first batch of children at the Playgroup in 1979. Support from AWWA volunteers and interaction with other parents in a similar situation gave the family much-needed relief. Peter's mother travelled to Australia to learn caregiving techniques, which she shared with the others, fostering a feeling of hope and shared understanding.

Similarly, Lay Cheng, now 53, who also has cerebral palsy, attended the Playgroup when it was at St James' Church. Her family credits the care and attention she received at AWWA for helping her learn basic social skills and exposing her to environments and people outside of her home, eventually allowing her to transition to another school with more specialised care.

Mrs Kathleen Chia, then a volunteer at the Playgroup who later became the Supervisor of AWWA Special School, formed a deep bond with both children, staying connected over the years by sending cards on special occasions and bringing them cakes on their birthdays. Even after four decades, Lay Cheng's eyes still light up at the mention of Mrs Chia's name, highlighting the lasting impact of these early relationships.

Meeting Future Needs

Social service organisations often face financial constraints. AWWA's early years exemplify how these women confronted the challenge of limited resources and explored every avenue to raise funds. From Flag Days to cultural programmes, coffee mornings, talks and demonstrations, they tapped into every possible resource. Donations often came from the members themselves, from organisations that they knew personally due to their social connections or from those who had been impressed by the work being done at AWWA.

Their efforts bore fruit. When the doors of the newly transformed AWWA FSC opened in 1985, it

stood as a testament to what collective goodwill could achieve – a space as nurturing and vibrant as the dreams that had fuelled its creation. Though the signage outside mentioned that the building was AWWA FSC, it was home to the Playgroup as well.

The excitement was palpable, and the AWWA Annual Report for that year began with the words, "The year under review will be remembered as a very memorable one in that, we at long last achieved our cherished dream. We moved into our own premises."



Handicapped Children Playgroup's Christmas party.



Inauguration of AWWA Family Service Centre by Mr Wong Kan Seng and Mrs Kula. (1987)

Together We Empower

At the inauguration of the FSC, then Minister for Community Development Mr Wong Kan Seng called the new venture a reflection of “the committee’s resourcefulness and its ability to keep pace with the needs of the community”.

“I feel that community welfare organisations managed by dedicated and committed volunteers are better placed than the government bureaucracy in providing community-based services to those requiring assistance,” he said. “In this respect, the Family Service Centre, insofar as it is a community-based service geared towards

building more cohesive families, provides a good model for others to emulate.”

As always, the message was taken seriously and given due attention. At the FSC, there was always a stream of beneficiaries passing through the doors to collect financial aid or food rations. AWWA made sure that social workers were on hand as well to discuss and provide counselling for issues like debts, unemployment, and housing needs that families might be facing. Since 9 Norris Road was tagged as an FSC, harmony within the family as one entity was always prioritised.

Under One Roof: The Move to Norris Road



AWWA Family Service Centre at Norris Road.

As AWWA expanded its horizons, the women who steered it yearned for a space to consolidate their activities under one roof. The Senior Community Home had its building in Ang Mo Kio, but the General Welfare and Aid Services and the Playgroup operated from borrowed premises. Cramped within the limited confines of an office at the NCSS, they faced the challenge of accommodating AWWA's team, highlighting the urgent need for a permanent haven to nurture their programmes.

Mrs Nimmi Handa, then President of AWWA, stated, "We have accommodated ourselves for a decade in borrowed premises. 1981 has been declared 'International Year of the Disabled' – What better gift other than a permanent, well-equipped play centre, can we offer our handicapped children."

A breakthrough came when the Ramakrishna Mission building on Norris Road went up for sale in 1982. Beyond its central location and suitability for AWWA's needs, the building had a spiritual significance, enriched by decades of monastic life, a legacy that appealed to Mrs Kula. Recognising the impact that AWWA had made in the community in a short span of time, the Mission not only agreed to sell it to them for \$555,000 but graciously accepted the payment in instalments over two years. Fortuitously, AWWA had sufficient reserves to make a down payment of 10%. They earmarked an equal amount for renovations to tailor the space to their unique needs where individuals with a passion to serve could come and make a difference.

Mrs Kula and Mrs Tambyah determinedly set about getting donations for materials required for the renovation. The community responded with open hearts, donating everything from paints, tiles, and sanitary fittings, all of which were accepted gratefully.

Senior Occupational Therapists at Singapore General Hospital were consulted to finalise the most suitable bathroom fittings for the elderly and the handicapped. Wide ramps were built to make it wheelchair accessible. The ladies went up and down countless lifts to assess which suited their purpose the best. This kind of thoughtfulness and

meticulous planning for eventualities have been a hallmark of AWWA since its early days.

On 1 January 1983, AWWA officially acquired 9 Norris Road and moved its headquarters, FSC, and Handicapped Children's Playgroup to its new premises. As the New Year dawned, it brought with it renewed excitement for future endeavours. Quiet pride filled the hearts of AWWA members as they stepped into what would be their own home, a mere thirteen years after they had begun their mission of making a difference in society.

Forging Ahead with Purpose

As the Playgroup gained popularity, the demand for its services outstripped the available space. It was evident that permanent facilities were required not only for the Playgroup but for other AWWA activities as well.

In 1986, the Handicapped Children's Playgroup was honoured with the UN Community Excellence Award. The judges hailed the project "as useful and relevant to other similar projects in the world". This recognition drew widespread attention to the programme. It not only validated that the programme was unique and innovative but also acknowledged that the hours of hard work put in by the volunteers had created an establishment that benefitted both differently-abled children and the community.

In recognition of the evolving role of the Playgroup, it was renamed the Centre for Multiply Handicapped Children (CMHC). AWWA was quick



The UN Community Excellence Award, awarded to the Handicapped Children's Playgroup.

to realise that the sooner children with multiple disabilities were helped, the better their chances of responding to therapy and improving their condition. They increased service hours and appointed more qualified staff to cater to a larger intake of students, aligning their service delivery with that of an educational institution.

Unconventional Excellence

CHMC could now accept more children, including those on waiting lists for other special schools. It operated independently of the Ministry of Education (MOE), which lacked teachers trained to handle children with additional needs. Sustained advocacy by organisations like AWWA finally led to a broader recognition within MOE of the need to train educators to work with

these children. In 1990, CMHC was registered as the AWWA Special School. For all intents and purposes, it was already functioning as one and henceforth, it would enjoy the status of being an educational institution catering to students with severe physical or intellectual and behavioural needs.

Staying the Course to Change More Lives

At the AWWA Special School, the care of the students was meticulous and personalised. Trained therapists and teachers assessed all children, ensuring that each child received the most appropriate care and education.

A carefully designed routine of exercises and the use of assistive devices where required enhanced their physical abilities. Physiotherapy played a crucial role in supporting muscle activity and preventing the development of physical



Students in a classroom session at AWWA Special School. (1993)



(Standing from left to right) Mrs Sandra Berrick, then President of Singapore Mr Wee Kim Wee, Mrs Tambyah, and Mrs Anand.

deformities. Speech therapists helped them learn to communicate in various ways. As children progressed enough to move to another school, AWWA was at hand to facilitate a smooth transfer.

A key feature of AWWA's programme was the inclusion of parents in the educational journey of their child. Mrs Berrick explains, "In most schools, parents are allowed only up to the main gate, but at AWWA School, they were welcomed into the classroom and made a part of their children's education journey." Parents were involved in the entire process and kept aware of the progress and future goals of the child. They learnt the necessary skills to continue this support at home. Events like Parents' Evenings further enhanced this integration. This platform provided emotional support and fostered a sense of community. The presence of fathers at these events was



Mrs Tambyah with students of AWWA Special School.

particularly heartening, marking a significant shift from the early days of the Playgroup when it was primarily mothers who had childcare responsibilities. This inclusive approach enriched the educational experience and strengthened the bond between parents and their children, further affirming the transformative power of AWWA's programmes.

AWWA was only allowed to retain children till the age of twelve. Transitioning out of school was challenging, as no other organisation was willing to accept them. Due to a lack of alternatives, these children often continued attending school even though they were much older. AWWA, from its earliest years, embodied a spirit of inclusion and support, maintaining an unwavering stand of never turning a child away.

One of a Kind

In another pioneering move, the school established a toy library for children in 1987. The first library of its kind, it was made possible thanks to an initial donation of \$5,000 from June's Beauty Saloon. It had toys and books specifically designed for children with special needs. Many students hailed from financially strained backgrounds would have otherwise been unable to afford these expensive resources.

Volunteers who had spent so much time at the school often brought their children along. Mrs Berrick fondly recalls how the mothers played with her 14-month-old daughter even as she cared for the other children. Mrs Tambyah's daughter, Malini Tambyah, would sometimes play the piano

or join the children in the hydrotherapy pool, as did so many others. Students from institutions like the Swiss Cottage School Art Centre, the United World College, and St Patrick's School pitched in to paint colourful murals in the classrooms.

AWWA, since its inception, has pushed for the integration of children with diverse educational needs in mainstream schools. While the journey towards inclusive education has been challenging, AWWA has consistently grown stronger. Mrs Tambyah once referred to the school as being at the "bottom rung" of the education ladder, yet it was that school that transformed the lives of countless children with multiple disabilities.



Mrs Tambyah with students from AWWA Special School.

The year 2000 saw the culmination of a year-long celebration of AWWA Special School's 20th anniversary, with the launch of "Three Special Friends", a book written jointly by Mrs Tambyah and then Supervisor of AWWA Special School Mrs Kathleen Chia. It was illustrated by Mrs Hiroko Miyamoto, a supporter of the school, and written from the point of view of children with additional needs. The aim was for these children to see kids like themselves featured in books and for the community to read their stories and normalise them as part of the social landscape.

Ushering in a New Era

The Playgroup started off at Norris Road on 2 July 1985. The spacious, three-storey building featured classrooms, physiotherapy rooms, and an auditorium that doubled as an indoor playground. While the Playgroup had, till then, functioned once a week, the new facilities, complete with a lift and specially adapted bathrooms for the handicapped, enabled it to operate every day. The solar-heated hydrotherapy pool in the courtyard further enhanced services. The seemingly ordinary playground at Norris Road was anything but ordinary. Sponsored by the Association Française de Singapour and built at a cost of \$16,000, the swings were specially designed to accommodate adults and had ramps wide enough to fit wheelchairs.

With a growing list of children waiting to join special schools, it made perfect sense to use the facility to its optimum. More teachers and physiotherapists were employed, and the range of services expanded. With an increase in working hours, the name of the Handicapped Children's Playgroup was changed to Centre of Multiply Handicapped Children in 1987. By 1990, it had received special school status from MOE and was renamed AWWA Special School.

In 1991, this building also became home to the new TEACH ME (TM) programme that was launched by AWWA.



Mrs Tambyah introducing then President of Singapore Mr Wee Kim Wee to Dr Irene Kwee, long-time supporter of AWWA at the official opening of the AWWA Special School (Mrs Kula in white saree).



The auditorium at AWWA's building in Norris Road doubled as an indoor playground for the Handicapped Children's Playgroup. (1986)

Partnering for More Social Impact

In the hope of expanding its services, AWWA was soon eyeing the next-door building at 3 Norris Road. Dr Ee Peng Liang, who was helming the Community Chest, generously offered AWWA an interest-free loan of \$1 million to be paid back in three years. As luck would have it, the year was 1990, and to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Singapore's independence, the government instituted a charity fund promising to match donations dollar for dollar.

AWWA organised a major fundraiser and raised \$600,000. Thanks to AWWA's reputation, more donations poured in directly from individuals and

organisations who had been touched by their work and whose vision aligned with AWWA's. In a letter written to Mrs Kula, Mrs Tambyah mentioned "we almost fell out of our seats when Guli (Ramnani) went on stage to receive the cheque from (then Deputy Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong from Singapore's 25th Anniversary Fund. We received enough to cover the purchase of the building and the renovations!"

This windfall of \$1.94 million enabled them to return the loan to Community Chest within eight months and honour Dr Ee's trust in them.

The Formation of the Community Chest

It was with a sense of relief that social service organisations welcomed the formation of the Community Chest in 1983. It was set up under the auspices of the SCSS. With the headache of fundraising taken away, the Community Chest allowed organisations like AWWA, which was among the early signatories, to channel their energy towards providing much-needed services to the community.

In the wake of the Hotel New World tragedy in 1986, the Community Chest approached AWWA for assistance. Chairs from the Norris Road premises were provided for use at the disaster site, and their premises opened for the relatives of the trapped victims. AWWA was one of the four social service agencies tasked with counselling victims, comforting family members, and supporting rescue workers.

The Norris Road facility not only stood out for its service contribution to the community but also gained recognition when it won a National Heritage Hunt Award for buildings with architectural and historical value.



The move to Kwong Avenue.

In 1999, as AWWA geared up to celebrate its 20th anniversary, an unfortunate incident occurred. Structural issues at AWWA Special School emerged as cracks appeared in the building, tiles popped, and water pipes began to leak, posing a safety risk to the students and the staff. The building was evacuated, and the school had to move to a temporary home at Sennett Primary School on Kwong Avenue. By then, AWWA FSC had already shifted to its own facility at Towner Road, which was larger and more suited to its expanding needs.

For the next few months, until Sennett Primary School moved out, both schools continued

on the same premises. Students participated in integrated activities, reinforcing AWWA's belief that a mainstream school and a special school could coexist. Kwong Avenue was to be their interim home for the next six years. The Norris Road property was an emotional anchor for AWWA. There was no question of going back to it, as a purpose-built campus was on the anvil, but selling it was a painful decision. It was leased out for a few years and eventually sold. Like always, it was time for AWWA to unfurl its wings and soar towards a bigger and brighter realisation of its dreams.

Educational Services which Empower



AWWA School @ Bedok.

Recognising the need for specialised attention and to focus on specifics, AWWA divided its educational services to create an Early Intervention Centre (EIC) for infants and toddlers attending preschool and two special education (SPED) schools for children from 7 to 18 years of age. AWWA officially opened a second school at Bedok in 2022, which is a dedicated institution for children with autism, while the campus at Lorong Napiri continues to support a wide spectrum of physical disabilities and/or autism.

AWWA's commitment to student development is encapsulated in the school motto, "Learn to Care, Care to Learn". Reflecting this ethos, the curriculum at both schools is tailored to meet the needs of children with diverse learning profiles and aligns with MOE's framework to foster independence and enhance the quality of life of young learners.



Dr Maliki Osman, Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs, visited AWWA School @ Bedok. (2024)

Inter-professional collaboration occurs between the teachers and therapists to achieve the individual scholastic goals set for the child so that educational goals are synchronised across the school and home settings.

Class Dojo, a communication app, is used to provide regular updates to caregivers on student activities and progress, and the schools are equipped with Information

and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and designs to enhance learning. Notably, the iCube Room at Bedok features interactive projections on the floor and walls that respond to students' movements, enabling them to learn through play and interaction. The Art Room and an Interactive Wall provide creative outlets by offering an alternative platform to explore and express their creativity through digital art.

ACCESS

The idea of having a purpose-built school was first mooted by AWWA in 1995. At the time, the school shared its building at Norris Road with other AWWA services, and the shortage of space was a constraint in expansion plans, leading to a long list of students waiting to get admission. Once the building at Norris Road was declared unfit for use, the matter gained momentum, and AWWA Special School eventually made 11 Lorong Napiri its new home.

The name AWWA Centre for Care, Education and Social Services (ACCESS) reflected the multitude of services, some ongoing, some on the anvil, to be delivered at the site. The project received financial support from MOE and MSF (then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports or MCYS). Additional support came from donors like NTUC, Caltex, KPMG, and the Lee Foundation. AWWA members also raised funds to meet any shortfalls.

At the ground-breaking ceremony, Guest-Of-Honour Mr Teo Chee Hean, then Minister for Education, praised AWWA's journey, highlighting the ACCESS building as a "significant milestone" and a testament to the dedication and perseverance of AWWA's leadership and staff.



The ACCESS building at 11 Lorong Napiri.

Formally inaugurated by then President of Singapore Mr S.R. Nathan in July 2006, the ACCESS building was designed to meet the varying needs of AWWA clients. Ms Maureen Fung, then AWWA CEO, recalled that a lot of time and effort went into gathering ideas for building the school. The building committee had to "stretch the building norms determined by MOE for special schools to ensure that facilities would be the best that's available in Singapore and that these would stand the test of time and meet the future needs of the school".

ACCESS became a benchmark for how institutions serving people with additional needs should be designed. Features like



GOH RAdm Teo Chee Hean addressing the crowd at the ACCESS building groundbreaking ceremony. (2003)



Official opening of ACCESS by then President of Singapore Mr S.R. Nathan. (2006)



Students and staff at the official opening of ACCESS. (2006)

non-slip tiles in classrooms and corridors, wheelchair-accessible toilets equipped with diaper-changing and shower facilities, and spacious, accessible multipurpose halls were just some of the thoughtful additions. The design also included wider steps and stainless-steel grab bars and railings, underscoring AWWA's commitment to advocating for improvements that directly affected the safety and comfort of their clients.

AWWA School @ Bedok: The Journey

For children with autism, the journey towards independence begins early and relies on the support of many within the community.

In response to the government's request to start classes for children with special needs such as autism, a new pilot – Project Challenge – was launched by AWWA in 2003. The project began with 18 children and was so successful that both MOE and NCSS requested that AWWA continue the programme.

Once the Compulsory Education Act was extended to children with moderate or severe special needs in 2019, the demand for schools for children with autism was set to increase. MOE selected AWWA to operate one of the four government-funded, autism-specific SPED schools in Singapore, namely AWWA School @ Bedok, which was inaugurated by then President of Singapore Madam Halimah Yacob, in 2022.

Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom

To enrich the school curriculum beyond the classroom, co-curricular activities (CCAs) have been introduced to enhance character building and provide students opportunities to explore and identify their strengths through activities like performing arts and sports.

The Annual Sports Day showcases the physical ability and mental grit of students. Activities are modified to suit students' varying profiles and needs – those capable of jumping can tackle hurdle races. Those in wheelchairs or using walkers are encouraged to go around the hurdles. AWWA School students also represent

their schools in national competitions organised by the Singapore Disability Sports Council or participate in Play Inclusive, an annual event to promote inclusion in the community through shared sporting experiences between persons with and without additional needs.

The Achievement Awards, initiated and funded by MOE since 2010, recognise significant accomplishments of pupils with special needs. The Lee Kuan Yew Exemplary Student Award, which was given to SPED students who became role models for their peers, has seen several AWWA School students receiving this award.



AWWA Special School's Sports Day. (1995)



Mrs Ruby Seah, former Principal of AWWA School @ Napiri, with a student at the school's Achievement Awards. (2013)

Advocacy for Edusave

In December 1990, the government announced the Edusave Fund, under which all school-going children up to the age of 16 could use the grant for extra-curricular activities. As children with disabilities were not made beneficiaries of this fund, Mrs Tambyah voiced her concerns.

After several appeals had been rejected, NCSS constituted a special Edusave Task Force to address this issue. Mrs Tambyah represented AWWA on the committee. Finally, in 1996, children in special schools above the age of six were given similar entitlements as their mainstream counterparts so that they could benefit from enrichment activities.

This eased the financial burden on the parents and schools. The children were exposed to more physical activities and therapy. Wheelchair tennis camps, aquatic activities, computer workshops, playing of musical instruments, dance, and watching theatre were just some of them. The results were immediately obvious. In April 1998, AWWA students participated for the first time in the 26th National Track and Field Championships organised by the Singapore Sports Council and came out with flying colours.

A Journey in Community Engagement

Since learning is not confined to classrooms, the schools constantly explore collaboration opportunities with stakeholders to expose students to diverse real-world interactions.

Since 2012, AWWA School @ Napiri has developed a satellite partnership with Bowen Secondary School. Students from both schools have forged friendships and learned about compassion and respect through joint recess, morning workouts, CCAs, and National Day Observance Ceremonies.

In 2024, during the Chinese New Year celebrations, students from Napiri had the opportunity to engage with the local community by visiting neighbourhood blocks. They spread festive cheer by knocking on doors, distributing oranges, and offering greetings to the residents, thus strengthening community ties and enhancing the visibility of individuals with special needs.

Similarly, AWWA School @ Bedok actively seeks and maintains robust partnerships with a broad



Bowen Secondary School celebrates National Day with AWWA School.

spectrum of stakeholders to forge relationships beyond its walls. In 2022, AWWA School students, accompanied by student volunteers from Temasek Junior College (TJC), went to Bedok Town Park. This excursion was mutually beneficial as it was a learning journey for our students and gave the TJC students a better perspective and awareness of the challenges faced by children with special needs.

Volunteers provide direct assistance in classrooms, hydrotherapy sessions, school outings, and other events. In partnership with OCBC, students at Napiri participated in a financial literacy workshop and practised numeracy and purchasing skills in a simulated supermarket setting.

Equipping Students for a World Beyond the School

Since 2001, pre-vocational training has been included in the list of activities for senior students. The Work Exposure Programme (WXP) further complements this training by providing both internal job experiences within AWWA and work attachment opportunities with external partners.

Aiman, diagnosed with autism, graduated in 2023 and gained valuable experience during his school-based attachment at the School's General Office. He later served as a station guide with SBS Transit for his WXP. Similarly, Gerard Leow, who graduated in 2023, found employment as a flexi-time kitchen assistant at Sushi Express. These placements align with the Enabling Masterplan 2030's vision of providing employment opportunities to individuals with additional needs. Fittingly, Sushi Express sponsored AWWA School @ Napiri's graduation celebrations in 2024 in a display of compassion and community spirit.

Over at Bedok, the School launched an urban farming module and started hydroponic gardening as a CCA to seed independence and inclusion through its Vocational Education Programme. Students work in teams to learn how to grow and harvest vegetables, which are shared with seniors and families living in vulnerable settings in the neighbourhood.

Over the years, sustained efforts by AWWA and increased social awareness have lessened the stigma attached to children with additional



Aiman securing a work attachment opportunity with SBS Transit while in AWWA School.

needs. Parents are more open to acknowledging when their children need help and feel assured that there are institutions like the AWWA Schools to support them, which can significantly enhance their child's development and integration into society.

Breaking Barriers and Bridging Gaps

Advocacy for inclusiveness, pioneering the establishment of the AWWA Playgroup and School, and proactive efforts towards early childhood support services have put AWWA at the forefront of organisations committed to working towards timely support for children with multiple disabilities and developmental needs. Experience has given AWWA the awareness of how timely intervention is crucial for children to better meet their developmental milestones and thrive at every age.

In 1991, AWWA, with the support of the Community Chest of Singapore, set up TEACH ME (TM), an acronym for Therapy and Educational Assistance for Children in Mainstream Education. It was later renamed Community Integration Service (CIS) to reflect its role in creating a supportive environment for students with physical disabilities and low vision to maximise their potential.

Championing Inclusion

"Education is the right of every child. There is no reason for a child who can learn as well as the next to be denied the right simply because she cannot go up and down the stairs or because she cannot hold a pencil as upright as the next girl," said Mrs Tambyah in an interview with The Straits Times on the rationale behind TEACH ME.

The inspiration behind this programme was two brothers, Liew Chong Choon and Liew Chong Heng, both students at AWWA Special School who were academically bright. The general perception of society at that time was to equate physical disability with mental disability. In addition, schools lacked the necessary resources to support these students. Mrs Kathleen Chia, then Chairman of the AWWA Special School, had tried but faced challenges in getting them enrolled in a mainstream school.

A 1990 MOE survey had shown that, even though a formal support programme was not in place, over 100 students with special needs were already attending regular schools. Considering this, NCSS (then SCSS) invited AWWA to run a pilot Integration Support Programme (ISP). A specially hired expert suggested giving consultations to schools and advising them to create conditions conducive to building a more inclusive school atmosphere. Mrs Tambyah felt that these students required therapy and had to be taught special skills to cope better with school life. Instead of leaving the job to individual schools, she decided to take the service directly to the schools and homes of these children. The name of the programme was changed from ISP to TEACH ME, reflecting the proactive step towards inclusive education.

A Pioneering Idea with an Innovative Approach

AWWA has consistently voiced support for those marginalised, particularly children with disabilities who had not been integrated into the mainstream education system. It was observed that parents had to take these children to medical facilities for therapy, and sessions were often missed because they were expensive and time-consuming. In one stroke, AWWA's TM model sought to address these issues.

A specially equipped van, donated by the Singapore Rotary Club, was fitted with physiotherapy aids and manned by professionally qualified therapists. The therapist, with van in tow, would visit the child in school or at home and provide therapy. Resource teachers monitored

the students' progress and assisted schools with additional integration needs.

To garner support for the programme, AWWA organised seminars to persuade schools that with the right infrastructure, students with mild disabilities could thrive. Social workers and therapists provided assurance that they would assist the school, as well as the student, while counsellors taught parents how to work around their child's health concerns and capabilities so that they could perform better.

In primary school, the Liew brothers joined TM – the initiative that they had inspired.

Wheels of Change

In 1993, TM served 70 children in 45 schools. The very next year, the number rose to 138. Today, CIS serves an average of 300 students annually.

TM impacted not just clients and their families but also the wider community. Heartwarming incidents, such as students helping to push wheelchairs, illustrated how a new generation was starting to accept their differently-abled friends as equal members of society. TM clients themselves benefitted by being in a mainstream school setting and being treated as one with their peers.

Over the years, the focus of TM evolved from being primarily therapy-driven to adopting a more holistic approach. NCSS, which was concurrently running a pilot project for preschool children, showed confidence in AWWA to merge the Assisted Integration Support Programme with TM in 1993. This merger optimised resources and enabled AWWA to provide integration services for students from preschool to secondary school.



A therapy session in the TEACH ME van.

When TM received the Family and Resource Training Centres' Innovative Programme Award in 1995, the Awards Committee appreciated "the process involving the rehabilitative and

developmental tasks of the disabled child and preventing the family from becoming dysfunctional as a result of the child's disability".

Journey Towards Success with TM

Bay Meng Chien, now an Assistant Vice President at a major bank, was in the pioneer batch of the TM programme and has the distinction of being TM's first undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS). A wheelchair user after an accident at a young age, Meng Chien recalls how the AWWA van would roll into his primary school once a week, providing much-needed therapy. AWWA staff worked with the school management to ensure a specially fitted toilet, and in the absence of lifts, classes on the ground floor were assigned to him. At the NUS Business School, AWWA's intervention led to ramps and retrofitted toilets being made available. "Little steps paved my way to where I am, and TM journeyed with me right up to my first job," he says.

A Moving Mission on Wheels



One of the TEACH ME mobile therapy vans.

Singapore had introduced the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) in April 1990, which gave a person or organisation the right to own and use a vehicle in Singapore, exempting only certain vehicles like ambulances from paying the fee. For four years, the two mobile therapy vans that AWWA used for the TM programme received COE exemption because they could be converted into ambulances for differently-abled children if required.

The matter came to a head in 1994 when AWWA received the donation of another therapy van. This time, it was asked to pay COE for it. If AWWA

accepted that the newest addition to its fleet of vans was not an ambulance, it would have to potentially pay COE for the other two vans as well. The COE, coupled with taxes and registration expenses, was about \$26,000 per vehicle, a relatively large sum for a non-profit organisation. The van was providing crucial therapy services to differently-abled children, that were otherwise very expensive and Mrs Tambyah felt that this service was as critical as that offered by an ambulance and took it upon herself to spearhead a campaign, on behalf of AWWA, to request for COE exemption.

What followed was extensive correspondence with officials and ministers outlining AWWA's case. Doing her spade work thoroughly and methodically, Mrs Tambyah found that the Mobile Dental Clinics run by MOE were COE-exempt but were not used to carry patients. She put up a case for AWWA's mobile therapy vans to be registered in the same category.

In a passionately-worded letter to Dr Kwa Soon Bee, then Permanent Secretary (Health), Mrs Tambyah wrote, "we have a fully equipped vehicle sitting in the workshop doing nothing as it can't go on (the) road until all the questions concerning the taxes are settled. Meanwhile, more than thirty children are being deprived of our services as the wheels of bureaucracy chug slowly on preventing the wheels of the Mobile Therapy Clinics from travelling the roads to the aid of children, their teachers and their families."

NCSS took up the issue on behalf of AWWA, as many other VWOs were also facing financial burdens because of the COE system.

Things began to move when Mrs Tambyah met then Minister for Community Development, Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, at a community event. Armed with facts and valid arguments, she convinced him of the need to exempt mobile therapy vans from COE. The Minister agreed to write a letter to Mr Mah Bow Tan, then Minister for Communication and the Environment, backing AWWA's appeal. This support had its desired consequence, and in June of the same year, the rules were changed to exempt all vehicles used by VWOs from COE, enabling them to continue vital services without facing the burden of prohibitive COE charges.

Once again, AWWA's steadfast advocacy had borne fruit and benefitted not just AWWA, but the wider community as well.

Charting New Pathways

In January 1998, AWWA pioneered a centre-based service at a Civil Defence Shelter in block 617 of Ang Mo Kio for children with Muscular Dystrophy (MD) and other physical disabilities who had to drop out of school due to deteriorating physical conditions. Ms Sherena Loh, co-founder and current Director of the Muscular Dystrophy

Association (Singapore) (MDAS), remembered that the centre provided rehabilitative intervention and organised camps and outings for its clients. The creation of a Parent Support Group facilitated more networking and ultimately led to the establishment of MDAS, which essentially started as a spin-off from AWWA TM.

Building Capabilities for a Fuller Life

As TM clients grew older and were poised to leave mainstream education, AWWA wanted to support their future needs and ensure their integration into society and all other aspects of life. Ms Anita Fam, then Chairman of TMS (TM Services comprised TM, TEACH ME In Circulation and AWWA SMILES, a day care programme), recalls in 2002 how she realised that the TM children did not have an equal playing field and that they needed a head-start to prepare for what lay ahead. To make this dream a reality, AWWA spearheaded TEACH ME In Circulation (TM Inc) – a job readiness programme. With support from UBS, the programme was designed to prepare young adults with additional needs for the workforce by equipping them with life skills, vocational guidance and the use of assistive devices. AWWA piloted the programme, which SG Enable has since taken forward.

the success of this programme was internships. The employers got a taste of what it meant to employ youths with additional needs while the interns themselves developed confidence that this could be done,” explains Mr Leo Chen Ian, who headed TM Inc. “Prior to TM Inc, the differently-abled clients were limited to very basic jobs. They were now looking at the option of open employment and not limiting themselves to sheltered employment. It was a programme ahead of its time,” he adds.

Ms Jeyamalar Ayadurai, then Asia Pacific Head of Human Resources, Diversity & Inclusion at UBS, and later an AWWA Board Director, remembers how TM Inc took upon itself to educate potential employers as well as lobby for equal employment opportunities for the differently-abled.

Under TM Inc, CIS clients underwent training in daily office operations. “The secret ingredient to

“AWWA kick-started this movement. Pathways are now routinely widened to accommodate



I Can! workshop by UBS for TEACH ME clients.

wheelchair users, making public transport more accessible for them. Greater visibility in public has meant greater understanding and awareness of the problems faced by persons with additional needs," she says, crediting AWWA for bringing this matter into the public eye.

Quick to plug a gap when it saw one, AWWA stepped in to help children and youths with low

vision studying in mainstream schools in 2010. AWWA supported their integration into schools, secured assistive devices and provided mobility training to these students. Ms Fam recalls that AWWA was the first organisation to create a low-vision support service and continues to provide school-based support for these students.

Shining in Sports

To develop the confidence of students and showcase to the public that students with additional needs could excel in sports, CIS actively promotes sports and enrichment activities for physical fitness, social interaction, and skill development, all tailored to various levels and learning needs of children with physical disabilities.

Over the years, the commitment to sports at CIS has produced numerous Paralympians like Yip Pin Xiu, Theresa Goh, Nurulasyiqah Taha, Jovin Tan, and Tan Li Bing. Their achievements underscore the impact of AWWA's programmes, proving that with the right support, every child can reach great heights.

Para-equestrian Maximillian Tan was also supported by TM as a student. "The transition support into mainstream school opened equal opportunities for me. The enriching programmes equipped and empowered me with skills for holistic development and encouragement to take charge of myself and have now given me equal opportunities in my career, social space, and lifestyle," he believes.

He credits CIS for introducing him to horse riding and its therapeutic benefits. "Riding became a big part of my life. I progressed from supported riding to becoming an independent rider, enjoying the freedom of mobility on a horse, building my confidence, and the trust and connection in my partner, the horse. These values have stayed with me until today and are the reason for my growth from a therapeutic rider to a Paralympian in equestrian sports. This journey and social network of lifelong friends are thanks to CIS," he shared.



Maximilian Tan (right) giving back to CIS, by emceeing at the AWWA CIS Awards in 2018.

Academics Not Far Behind

In partnership with MOE, CIS clients are integrated into mainstream schools. These students are provided emotional and social support by AWWA social workers. Consultations and case conferences are held with schools to identify and address student integration needs. Training is provided for students and school personnel in the use of assistive technology. The therapists at CIS cater to the diverse needs of clients by using their expertise to deliver targeted interventions aimed at ensuring holistic development and progress. Training workshops empower caregivers and educators with knowledge and skills to support students, strengthening the support network within the community.

At a room dedicated to developing Independent Living Skills, therapists assess, train, and prescribe adaptive or assistive aids such as modified keyboards or special pointing devices that help clients in daily living and self-help skills.

Year after year, CIS students have made remarkable academic achievements, exemplifying the potential in these children. The CIS Awards (formerly known as the CIS Special Awards) began in 2000, to recognise the extraordinary strength of CIS clients in their endeavour to integrate and excel in mainstream education. Over the years, it has evolved into a platform to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of various partners, including caregivers, buddies, teachers, schools, and other organisational partners. What we perceive as normal today was something that AWWA had to stand up for, shape public opinion, and demonstrate that given the right support, differently-abled children could thrive alongside their peers. "When I meet my ex-TM clients today, I see that these kids have become confident adults, forging their own lives, and being wonderful examples to others who aspire to be like them," said Ms Fam.

Bridging Gaps and Fostering Independence

1998

Mrs Tambyah, on invitation from NCSS, chaired and facilitated a workshop on Planning for Inclusion and Enablement. Discussions related to creating a level playing field for children with disabilities, nurturing their aspirations in the public realm, and a framework to improve the situation were charted out.

2000

When school management teams expressed difficulties in integrating students with disabilities, AWWA facilitated a meeting with MOE to discuss accessibility-related concerns.

2001

Handwriting assessments were conducted for TM clients to identify clients who would need extra time for their exams. All recommendations made to the school principals and MOE were accepted.

2002

A joint pilot project with MOE saw TM tackle the challenge of how students handled geometrical instruments, eventually leading to the establishment of Lab INTEGRATE, where assistive and adaptive devices are developed, tested and modified for clients.

2003

The Best Practices guidelines for TM's Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, and Speech Language Therapy, an initiative of NCSS, were formulated and implemented.

2006

- The Therapy Department worked with the Building and Construction Authority in their revision of the Code on Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings (now known as Code on Accessibility in the Built Environment). Design guidelines for children with disabilities were included in this document.
- AWWA social workers routinely liaised with HDB to request for priority allocation of flats on lift landing floors. This improved the overall mobility and independence of their clients.
- TM staff represented AWWA in the new National Library Board building's Civic Group (Disabled) to gather views from VWOs on accessibility features.
- TM successfully completed a collaborative public education project with the Ministry of Community Development and Sports by producing two compact discs, which included an information kit for caregivers of children with special needs and an application kit for caregivers of children with physical disabilities.

Fostering Independence Through Nature and Nurture



Volunteers of the Happy Friends Club cheering along with TM clients.

“Mother Nature welcomes everyone with open arms and does not differentiate between the able and differently able,” reflects Leo Chen lan, diagnosed with cerebral palsy. In 1993, at Mrs Tambyah’s request, lan founded the Happy Friends Club, which organised educational

and recreational activities for TM clients. From picnics to camps, locally and overseas, the events helped members experience the outdoors while incorporating therapy and character-building activities.

Breaking Barriers of the Mind

Tan Kai Soon benefitted from TMS therapy and educational support after he was diagnosed with Becker's Muscular Dystrophy at 18. At Singapore Polytechnic, intervention by TMS ensured that a ramp was built for him and he no longer had to be carried down the stairs by his classmates. The *Be With Me* Scholarship, set up jointly by TM and Zhao Wei Films, provided financial assistance to students from lower-income families like Kai Soon and helped him further his studies without

worrying about an education loan. Kai Soon then graduated from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with a degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering and was offered a position with AWWA, where he now works in the IT department. Reflecting on his journey, he says, "AWWA gave me space to grow, and become the best possible version of myself. The opportunity to work with AWWA both, as a client and an employee, changed my life."

Lending a Listening Ear

In 2001, motivated by Mrs Tambyah, AWWA published the book, *Hey Listen! We Have Something to Say*, a compilation of essays written by 13 young individuals supported by TM. They shared their thoughts and experiences to reframe the public's perception of the differently-abled.

A decade later, its sequel, *Hey Listen, We've Got More To Say!*, expanded this narrative to include 29 clients. Many of these clients had grown into young men and women, financially independent and making a mark in their chosen fields.



Printed copies of the 'Hey Listen! We Have Something to Say' book.

Nurturing Para Athletes

Ms Amanda Mok, a Procurement Executive at AWWA and a former TM client, never let Spina Bifida limit her from living an active and meaningful life. Introduced to hand cycling by a TM social worker, Amanda says she embraced the thrill of moving at high speeds, something that her medical condition otherwise prevented her from doing. She has proudly represented

Singapore in major international events, including the ASEAN Para Games and International Para Cycling Cup, winning numerous awards, such as the Goh Chok Tong Enable Award which honours the achievements of persons with disabilities. She credits TM for fostering her confidence, sense of discipline, and opening a world beyond Singapore through sports.

Every Child Matters: The Journey Towards Compulsory Education

AWWA has embraced a consistent stance on levelling the playing field for learners of all abilities through efforts like TM in the 1990s, to the establishment of Kindle Garden, Singapore's first inclusive preschool in 2016.

The journey, however, has not always been smooth. The government, recognising education as a key factor in achieving growth and stability for the nation, had been mulling over plans to make education compulsory and set up a committee in 1999 to look into the matter. In a letter to The Straits Times that year, Mrs Tambyah, then Chairperson of the TM Resource Panel, lauded the governments' plans. She highlighted that while MOE was trying to search for parents who were not sending their kids to schools, there was an entire group of children with special needs who had been left out of mainstream schools.

The recommendations of the Committee on Compulsory Education (CE) published in 2000, came as a big disappointment, as it recommended the exclusion of children with special needs in the CE framework. A few VWOs running Special Education schools got together to respond to them. Mrs Chia, then Supervisor and Chairman of AWWA Special School Management Committee, and Mrs Tambyah were among the signatories who argued that this would only serve to widen the gap and further marginalise them. They appealed to the Committee to reconsider, advocating that CE would enable these children to become independent and contributing members of society rather than liabilities.

Despite their efforts, the Compulsory Education Bill was passed in 2000, ensuring six years of primary school education for all children, but excluded children with special needs.

Making Singapore a Truly Caring Nation

AWWA, in collaboration with NCSS and seven other VWOs, established the Joint Committee for Compulsory Education for All (JCCEA), which was chaired by Mrs Tambyah.

A survey conducted to ascertain the views of parents of children with special needs showed that an overwhelming number of parents responded in favour of their children being included in CE.

In 2004, armed with compelling survey results and data, the Committee submitted a report to the government. Titled “A Case for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Compulsory Education”, it put forward the argument that since Singapore had ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which granted the right to education as a fundamental human right, Singapore should extend CE to all children.

The Committee concluded that “compulsory education for children with special needs is not only viable, it is necessary”.

Ms Claire Lim, then President of AWWA, recalled meeting the then Minister for Education, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, along with other representatives of JCCEA. The meeting that was to have lasted for an hour went on for much longer as he patiently listened to them. Even though their appeal was not granted, they were given hope that the “door was not closed”.

Mrs Tambyah wrote to ministers, dignitaries, the press, and anyone willing to lend a listening ear. Keeping up the pressure, she generated public awareness and opinion, not letting the issue die down.

An Evolving Policy Landscape

In 2004, at the official opening of the Spastic Children’s Association of Singapore’s Cerebral Palsy Centre, then Prime Minister Lee remarked, “How the society treats the disabled, takes care of them, and helps them to integrate into the mainstream, reflects the kind of society it is.” This sentiment resonated deeply with AWWA’s ongoing advocacy efforts, underscoring the importance of societal support for children with additional needs.

Change was on the horizon, but progress was slow. The Enabling Masterplan of 2006 recognised the significance of an early intervention programme for the positive development of children, especially for children with developmental needs. The government, though sympathetic, was still working towards finding a solution to translate this idea into practice.

In 2008, speaking at “Meeting on the Rights of the Child”, a convention fronted by a human rights non-governmental organisation Maruah, Mrs Tambyah passionately argued, “It is time to recognise that special needs children are Singaporeans who should not be denied their rights. As sons and daughters of this soil, their education is not an act of charity. It is their right.” Her words signified a shift from considering education for children with special needs as a requirement, to recognising it as a fundamental right.

Mrs Berrick recalls, “Mrs Tambyah was a tenacious and determined lady. She fought for Compulsory Education no matter how many times it was rejected.”

Persistent efforts eventually brought about a change. A 17-member advisory panel helmed by Dr Janil Puthuchear, then Minister of State for Education, was tasked to examine the need for CE for children with special needs. Ms Ruby Chiew, then Principal of AWWA School, served as one of the panellists. The recommendations of this Committee were accepted, and it was agreed that from 2019 onwards, CE would be extended to children with moderate to severe special needs so that they too could attend publicly funded schools.

Through years of relentless advocacy, AWWA’s vision of inclusiveness had finally borne fruit and transformed the education ecosystem.

Therapy Services: Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

At the heart of AWWA’s multi-service landscape, lies the Allied Health Professional Group (AHPG), one of Singapore’s earliest and largest therapy hubs. Composed of skilled Physiotherapists (PTs), Occupational Therapists (OTs), Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), and Psychologists, this team forms the backbone of AWWA’s mission to provide comprehensive and personalised care to persons across all life stages.

The journey of AHPG is marked by significant milestones that underscore its influence. By 1979, with the establishment of the Playgroup for children with additional needs, therapeutic services became integral to supporting these children. The TM programme was also therapy-

intensive and dependent on a small but dedicated team of therapists who provided services to clients at their educational institutions.

The landscape of therapy services began to shift around 2009. There had been conversations about creating a system in Singapore wherein therapists could only be employed by organisations approved by the government and could supervise them. AWWA CEO, Mr J R Karthikeyan (Karthik), an OT by training and then Director of TM Services, sensing an impending change, decided to scale up the number of therapists and seal AWWA’s position as a therapy hub.



Physiotherapy services being conducted for children in the early years of AWWA.

In 2012, Karthik spearheaded the creation of the Centralised Therapy Services (CTS) model. Therapists from TEACH ME, Early Years Centre, AWWA School & Intermediate Long-Term Care, who had previously worked in silos, were organised under one unified system. With growing awareness of the benefits of therapists and the exponential growth in services, AWWA was able to expand, increase capacity and build a pool of capable therapists internally, into a better-organised and competent resource to meet AWWA's evolving needs.

The Allied Health Professional Bill was passed in 2013 when the CTS was fully functional as a holding department for all of AWWA's allied resources. It supported therapists working internally for AWWA and those providing services to external organisations. Today, CTS has been rebranded as the AWWA AHPG, comprising over 170 professionals who support in-house services, and over 60 external agencies across the social service and healthcare sectors.

Leveraging Technology to Enhance Services

To align with AWWA's mission of using technology and tools to enhance service delivery, the AWWA Tech Taskforce identifies and implements appropriate assistive technologies tailored to individual client needs. They could be gadgets, apps, online resources, or virtual sessions. In addition, it helps staff streamline internal processes and build strategic external partnerships to boost operational efficiency and outreach.

At AWWA, the InnovTech Fest is an annual internal showcase of the latest assistive technology adopted by AWWA AHPs, with the broader aim to engage staff, develop capability, increase exposure to new technologies, and enhance the overall care provided to clients.

A key objective of the AWWA Tech Taskforce is to enhance client participation in the community, leading to greater social inclusion



An AWWA staff showcasing 3D printing technology at AWWA InnovTech Fest 2024.

and self-sufficiency. During COVID-19, the task force introduced tele-practice interventions. Utilising online home care exercise prescription platforms, the team successfully engaged caregivers and clients, demonstrating the practical benefits of remote support programmes. It leverages 3D printing to provide cost-effective, customised solutions for persons with disabilities. In collaboration with NUS' bGood, a social impact initiative from their Department of Biomedical Engineering, a handle-like device called iPush has been developed to help wheelchair users manoeuvre and navigate easily.



'Charlie and Us', a resource app for caregivers of persons with autism, was showcased at AWWA InnovTech Fest 2023.

Building Bridges, Bringing Smiles

Every morning at the Special Student Care Centre (SSCC), 8-year-old Seth greets SSCC staff with a wide smile. Previously reluctant to follow instructions, Seth, who is diagnosed with autism, has undergone a remarkable transformation thanks to the dedication of SSCC staff, who conducted behavioural strategy sessions with him. He is now confident, outgoing, and has made many friends.

Seven-year-old Michael, who is diagnosed with Down syndrome, also found it difficult to adapt initially, making him prone to bursting into tears. With consistent reassurance and support from SSCC staff, Michael has blossomed into a cheerful boy who enjoys participating in class activities.

These transformations underscore AWWA's belief that all children should be nurtured well, but some may require additional support to unlock their potential. Stories like those of Seth's and Michael's highlight SSCC's commitment to building an environment where children with additional needs can thrive, build social connections, and find joy in their daily activities. The centre is nestled in a conducive facility at Lorong Napiri, next to AWWA School.

Established in 2006 as Students Meet for Interaction, Learning and Enrichment Services (SMILES), SSCC came about in response to a call from caregivers to provide an after-school care centre for clients aged between 7 and 18 with physical and intellectual disabilities.

A Hub of Support and Learning

Then President of AWWA, Ms Claire Lim, was closely involved with the establishment of SSCC. "When we started, we were sure that we did not want to be just a care facility," she says. "We desired to provide a safe and enriching environment for each child and some respite from childcare for their parents. We felt that assuring family members that their children were in an inclusive and supportive environment would allow them to return to the workforce and better support their families."

With a capacity to accommodate up to 50 clients, the after-school care centre operates a comprehensive care model, offering life-skills training programmes, and enrichment activities conducted in a community setting. During school holidays, the centre operates full-day services, with daily schedules packed with meaningful activities that build independent living skills and promote community integration. SSCC's uniqueness lies in not restricting itself to students from just AWWA School, but it also takes in students with mild to moderate and multiple disabilities from other SPED schools.



Ms Claire Lim (middle, in white blazer) at the official opening of ACCESS, which was inaugurated by then President of Singapore Mr S.R. Nathan. (2006)

Enhancing Lives Through a Wide Range of Programmes

With the conviction that learning should transcend traditional classroom boundaries, and no two clients respond in the same manner to stimulation, SSCC provides a dynamic range of activities for the children to grow, as interventions are tailored to meet individual needs. Clients,

many of whom may experience social isolation at home, are given opportunities for socialisation, to engage in physical activities and outings, and be exposed to visual and performing arts to help them blossom holistically.

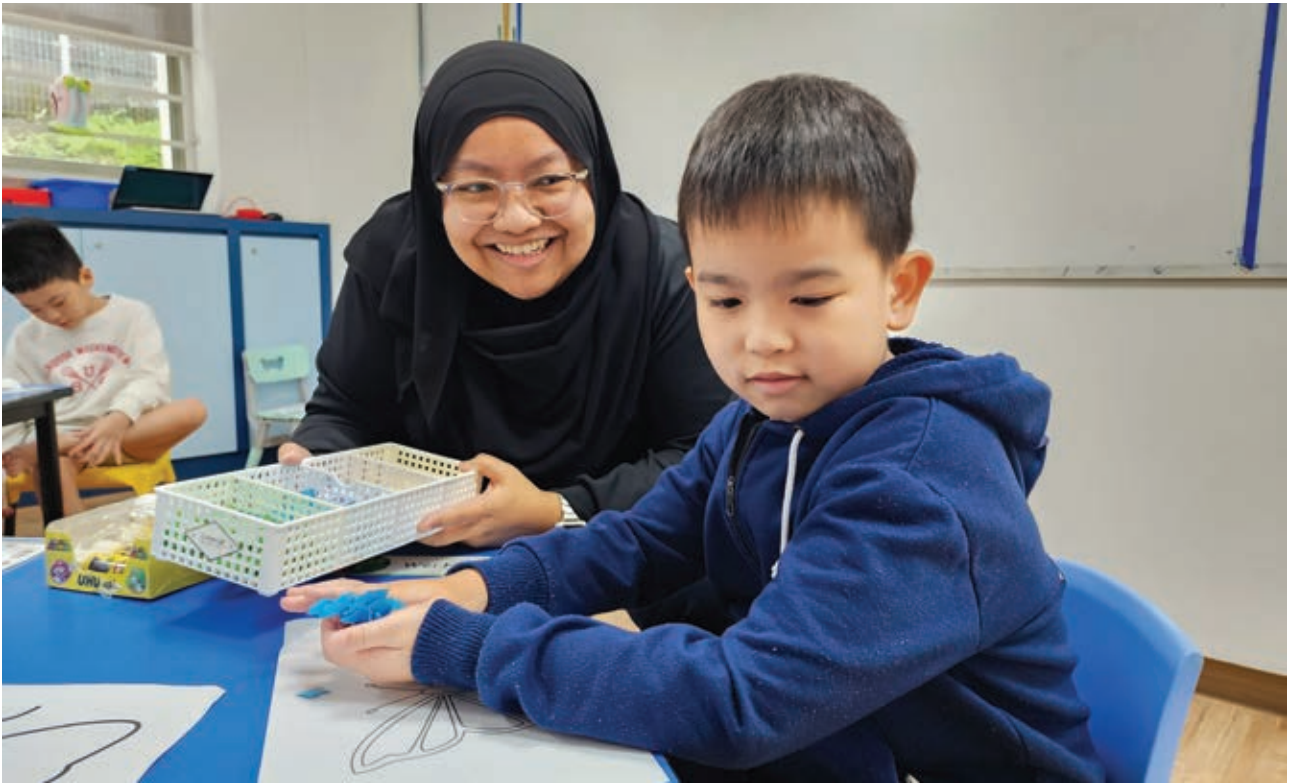
“As parents, we had the peace of mind knowing that he was in good care the whole day from the morning (at AWWA School) till evening (at AWWA SSCC). This arrangement has allowed us to have fruitful full-time careers. We also managed to cope with Joshua’s challenging teenage years with the many helping hands (AWWA School, SSCC, and family members). Given his familiarity with spending time out of home, he has had no issues in adapting to life at a day activity centre.”

Father of former client, Joshua Ong Hong Jie.

Volunteer Support

Volunteers are indispensable to SSCC, and AWWA relies heavily on corporates and community individuals. They help facilitate classes and accompany children on various outings. This hands-on learning is fundamental to preparing the clients to integrate successfully into the broader community. While tools such as social

stories, role play, and visual aids are effective in teaching social etiquette, interaction with volunteers from diverse backgrounds provides real-life opportunities for observation and instruction, enabling clients to develop essential social skills in a practical setting.



An AWWA programme executive engaging with an SSCC client.

Mr Raveen Bharvani, ESG Lead at LGT Private Banking Singapore, acknowledges that the engagement of their volunteers with SSCC has been "one of the most challenging, yet rewarding parts of our volunteering calendar". Starting off

with supporting the SSCC staff as an "extra pair of hands", LGT volunteers have gone on to develop programmes for their sessions with the clients, while exploring new ways to deepen their impact through SSCC.

A Journey of Collaborative Learning

In recent years, client referrals have shown an increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). AWWA continues to consciously and actively build staff capability in managing these emerging client needs through in-house training programmes.

AWWA has always been open to sharing its service model and best practices with other organisations and SSCCs like those at MINDS, Rainbow Centre, and Fei Yue. Professor Kenneth Poon, former President at Rainbow Centre and currently Dean of Education Research and Centre Director of the Centre for Research in Child Development at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), has acknowledged AWWA as one of the agency's preferred collaborators whenever they venture into new grounds within the special needs education sector.

SSCC networks with SPED school personnel to share tips, strategies and best practices, further enhancing the quality of care across the sector and serving as an open educational source of rich

experiences and depth of knowledge to current and upcoming SSCCs. A key strategy involves providing transition support for newly enrolled SSCC clients with ASD. AWWA School collaborates closely with SSCC by sharing tailored transition strategies. New clients at the centre are offered hands-on support for any behavioural challenges that may arise. This approach ensures a smooth transition, providing the SSCC team with practical guidance and enhancing the client's comfort and adaptation to the new environment. It also maintains close communication with caregivers and other community partners like FSCs to mutually leverage on each other's resources and expertise when required.

AWWA SSCC not only nurtures young minds but also actively shapes an inclusive future where every child's potential is recognised and cherished. Through continuous learning, community collaboration and deep commitment to supporting special education, SSCC stands as a pivotal part of AWWA's mission to empower every individual in their care.

AWWA SSCC conducts a Happy Face Survey daily to understand how clients feel and evaluate their enjoyment of activities. From January 2022 to September 2023, the percentage of satisfied clients increased steadily from 77% to 95%, validating the hard work and innovative programmes conducted at the centre and helping the staff design more effective programmes.

5

Early Years

CHAPTER FIVE

“

We (AWWA) had to show, that what we were doing was working and was effective. We were willing to take on things that others weren't. We were willing to try out things that others hadn't tried. We were willing to run them for a couple of years and then very objectively assess how successful they had been. That's how the EIPIC programme was started.

”

***Mrs Sandra Berrick, former Principal,
AWWA Special School.***



An early intervention session supporting a child with developmental delays.

Commitment to Early Intervention

In 1992, the government piloted the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC) to assess the effectiveness of early intervention for children with developmental needs, and in 2005, AWWA launched its first Early Years Centre (EYC). EYC provided this service

through a transdisciplinary approach where structured teaching was conducted to help children develop appropriate social behaviours and enhance learning and independent living skills.

AWWA's Strategic Journey with EIPIC

As an early mover, AWWA contributed towards developing best practices in the early intervention (EI) space, closely collaborating with government agencies, including MSF and MOH, to grow EI programmes. Data was gathered to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions and to refine programmes as part of the early childhood (EC) landscape.

- In 2000, AWWA formed a Future Programmes Committee to look into the potential direction of the school which recommended that AWWA continue to serve children with additional needs.
- AWWA School and MCYS co-organised the EIPIC Symposium in 2004.
- The EYC was involved in the pilot implementation of Outcome Management, introduced by NCSS, at the end of 2005.
- In the same year, then Principal of AWWA School, Ms Annie Tan, was invited by MCYS to chair the

EIPIC Committee and look into issues related to curriculum, programme evaluation, teacher training, and other matters.

- In 2006, two EIPIC classes were selected to test the Assessment, Evaluation and Programming System to help strengthen school readiness for every child by tracking and supporting core skills across all areas of development.
- AWWA was commissioned by MSF in 2011 to enhance the principles and practices for providing effective early intervention to children with developmental delays and standardise processes for EIPIC centres.
- In 2019, AWWA participated in the implementation of the Early Childhood Holistic Outcome (ECHO) framework, commissioned by the Lien Foundation and led by the KK Women's and Children's Hospital, to promote family involvement in early intervention and establish a framework for service standards and monitoring.



Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, then Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, interacting with young clients at the EIPIC Symposium. (2004)

Matching Needs with Care

In 2019, MSF unveiled plans to enhance the EI framework by ensuring the right placement of children with developmental needs, with two new programmes – EI Under-2s and Development Support-Plus (DS-Plus), both of which had been piloted by AWWA years prior.

EI Under-2s is a centre-based programme for infants with medium to severe developmental delays. This parent-centric programme plays a complementary role by providing home-based therapy intervention to children who require additional support. Therapists do home visits to offer guidance on making the house child-friendly and training caregivers. Funded by the

Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), this is a needs-based programme and at the age of two, these children can transition to EIPIC @ Centre.

EIPIC @ Centre caters to children through appropriate classroom activities and a structured routine at home and the centre. Children with mild to moderate developmental needs receive individualised learning and developmental goals. AWWA helps them transition to mainstream preschools and integrate with minimal support under the DS-Plus. The intervention can be short-term or continue until the child graduates from preschool.



A screenshot of then President of Singapore Madam Halimah Yacob's Facebook post of her visit to AWWA EIC @ Fernvale. (2019)

Former President of Singapore Madam Halimah Yacob posted on Facebook in 2019, "Every child deserves a bright future. Visited AWWA Early Intervention Centre (EIC) @ Fernvale today and happy to learn more about how the Centre assists children who face developmental challenges so that they can transit smoothly to schools."

For those requiring more intensive support, the EIPIC High Needs programmes cater to children with severe conditions such as ASD, physical disabilities or co-morbidities. Additional support

is provided at home or at the centre, alongside caregiver engagement. If progress is made, the child is introduced to social interaction at the centre within six months.

Similarly, EIPIC @ Home serves children whose severe disabilities make travel challenging. This programme ensures that therapeutic interventions continue in the comfort of their home, with therapists providing the necessary training and support to families.

Creating Enriching Learning Environments

The thematically designed EICs provide specialised support to children who have additional needs and no adaptive skills to communicate and learn in large group settings. The environment stimulates natural learning through fun and play. Classroom activities and daily routines embed more learning opportunities for the child in the centre and at home.

The programme focuses on providing access to a range of EI services that are therapeutic and sensory-based, prioritising each child's medical and educational requirements, and catering to the family's needs with the aim of helping them achieve the most active and independent life possible. Such interventions allow for a smoother transition for these children into special or mainstream schools when they reach school-going age.

An Individualised Educational Plan (IEP) for each child at AWWA EIC is crucial in this process. Tailored to each child's functional level, the EIC team will work with caregivers to embed the IEP goals into the child's daily routine.

Diane, a four-year-old with ASD attending EIC @ Kim Keat, exemplifies the success of these plans. She initially struggled with adaptive skills and adherence to routines, but her behaviour changed after her IEP was implemented. Diane now actively participates in group activities, pays attention to instructions and can follow a routine. AWWA's EI programmes work towards making every environment a place of growth and discovery, thus ensuring consistency in a child's development.



An AWWA therapist guiding a caregiver on strategies to support her child.

Expanding Support, Beyond EI

Recognising that each child's journey is closely intertwined with their family, EIPIC focuses on empowering caregivers. The AWWA preschool support service has rolled out several workshops on behavioural management, catered to parents and teachers. With a growing awareness of what can benefit the child, caregivers are guided to facilitate learning in everyday settings. The programme looks at family situations, sibling dynamics, and inter-team collaboration, going beyond what is already being done. This holistic approach ensures that the benefits of EI permeate every aspect of the child's life, promoting educational success and overall well-being.

Since 2022, AWWA EIC has provided centre-based interim support to children on their waiting lists. Their caregivers benefit from virtual tele-interventions, demonstrating AWWA's commitment to accessible and continuous care. Parents from the EIPIC programme often choose to journey with AWWA and move on to AWWA School. This preference is due to AWWA's holistic and structured preschool engagement, which provides services that support not just the functional needs of the child but also their overall welfare and development needs.

Expanding Horizons and Enhancing Services

With a vision to be a centre of excellence and choice for children with special needs, AWWA commenced operations to provide EIPIC services at Lorong Napiri. Since then, it has expanded to other centres at Hougang (2016), Fernvale Link

and Kim Keat (2017), and Fernvale Woods (2023). Today, AWWA is one of the largest EI providers in Singapore, serving over 1,000 children annually with moderate to severe developmental needs.



An Early Intervention session at EIC @ Hougang. (circa 2017)

Navigating the Future of Inclusive Education

As AWWA looks to the future, the journey towards creating an inclusive society extends beyond integrating individuals with additional needs into educational settings. According to AWWA CEO, Mr J R Karthikeyan (Karthik), the path forward involves nurturing an environment that supports diversity at every level – not merely through policy but in practice and perception.

Since the first Enabling Masterplan (EMP) in 2007, Singapore has seen a significant shift in its disability inclusion model. As a member of the steering committee for EMP 2030, Karthik envisions a future where persons with additional needs can live independently and participate actively across different settings.

On why advocacy for inclusion remains relevant and critical, Karthik elaborates, "AWWA is consciously working towards building an ecosystem around people with additional needs to change perceptions and to organically and holistically include them in the community. It is not just about integrating that person. Rather, it is about working with members of society to build awareness and help them better understand how to accept people of different abilities in its fold." To achieve this, Karthik believes that while solving present-day problems, AWWA should also be looking out for "what's coming around the corner".

As a step forward, AWWA now serves children with complex medical problems from birth to six. Future efforts will focus on creating a robust support system to empower the entire family to care for the child and develop adequate coping mechanisms through holistic care practices. These changes reflect AWWA's commitment to provide effective and comprehensive care for children and their families so that they can look forward to a better and more supported future.

A Holistic Approach to Inclusion

Associate Professor Wong Meng Ee from the National Institute of Education and a specialist in Psychology and Child and Human Development, commends AWWA's efforts of "not shying away from difficult conversations...falling back on research, falling back on evidence...to communicate and assuage the powers who make these important decisions to continuously engage them". In 2012, AWWA, with funding from MSF and NCSS, launched the Development Support Programme (DSP) for mainstream preschoolers with mild developmental delays. AWWA therapists provided therapy and learning support directly at their preschool centres, reminiscent of the inclusive model used in the AWWA TM programme. The goal was to help children overcome their challenges early and develop the skills to thrive in mainstream primary schools.

For AWWA Board Director Ms Ng Chin Yu, "What distinguishes AWWA from many other

organisations is that AWWA is a 'learning organisation'. Over the years, AWWA has learned, adapted, and adopted by giving people more authority and space to run programmes and bringing in new ideas to provide the best possible service to its clients". This initiative evolved into the Development Support-Learning Support (DS-LS) programme in 2013, focusing on children needing minimal EI support. DS-LS is a cornerstone of AWWA's inclusion efforts, as AWWA therapists work collaboratively with other EC and EI professionals to support children based on their specific needs. This includes encouraging preschool teachers to adopt new strategies to bridge the divide between clients with additional needs and their typically developing peers.

This strategic progression emphasises AWWA's proactive and holistic approach to advocacy and support for children with developmental needs.

Kindling a Flame of Inclusion

AWWA has long championed an inclusive education system where typically developing children and children with additional needs learn together in the same classroom. This vision first took shape when the Future Programmes Committee (2000), chaired by Mrs Sandra Berrick, proposed the symbolic removal of the word 'Special' from the school's name. The AWWA Special School became AWWA School, signalling a clear commitment towards inclusion.

Further elaborating on the roadmap that AWWA was journeying on, Karthik explained, "Inclusion is not the same as integration. Rather, it is the flexibility of thinking, and the quality of thinking,

to accept diversity." This philosophy paved the way for AWWA to launch Kindle Garden (KG), Singapore's first inclusive preschool in 2016, with support from the Lien Foundation.

Situated in Enabling Village at Lengkok Bahru, a model community designed by SG Enable to embody inclusivity, KG is a progressive preschool that provides a non-discriminatory curriculum and educational instruction for children of all abilities, including those diagnosed with additional needs like Global Developmental Delay, Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, and hearing and visual impairment.



A Kindle Garden preschool educator engaging children at the centre.



A student of
Kindle Garden
preschool.

Leading the Charge in Policy and Practice

Inclusive education is the cornerstone of an inclusive society that values diversity and empowers individuals of all abilities to participate and thrive. At KG, this philosophy comes to life through a holistic pedagogy designed to shift the narrative of quality early childhood education in Singapore.

Inclusion begins with the physical environment. Nestled amidst lush greenery, the preschool was deliberately designed not to resemble a clinical facility but a vibrant, inviting space for exploration, self-expression, and growth. Thoughtful design features like textured flooring serve dual purposes: helping children navigate their surroundings while acting as multi-sensory reminders to support peers with additional needs.

KG preschoolers thrive in dynamic spaces designed to nurture holistic development. An indoor gym with modular sections and an outdoor playground encourage physical activity, helping children build essential motor skills while forming meaningful social connections. Free-form teaching areas inspire creativity and exploration, while cosy reading nooks foster literacy and self-confidence – laying the foundation for a well-rounded learning experience.

KG's approach has been transformative for Zachary, who has ASD and struggled to adjust to other preschools. Supported by a diverse team of specialists – including dedicated educators, early interventionists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists – Zachary learned

essential activities of daily living (ADLs), such as brushing his teeth and dressing independently. To ensure his progress continued at home, Zachary's mother was also equipped with strategies to reinforce his development.

Zachary's journey reflects the heart of KG's "Many Hands Approach", which emphasises the unique potential of every child. By working in tandem with parents, individualised learning plans are developed to nurture each child's ability and ensure they are given the tools to succeed.

In the classroom, resources and activities are adapted to accommodate diverse learning needs. With a low teacher-to-child ratio, every child receives personalised support and resources to develop holistically. Through peer-to-peer learning, children are encouraged to care for and learn from one another. For example, a child who

excels at counting might partner with a peer with strong language skills, creating an environment where everyone's strengths are celebrated.

Hands-on learning is also a key tenet of the curriculum. Activities like light and shadow play spark curiosity about the world and lay the foundation for future exploration in topics like science and technology. As children grow, they engage in a project-based curriculum that empowers them to take ownership of their learning journeys, fostering independence and critical thinking.

From developing cognitive and motor skills to cultivating compassion, conscientiousness, and confidence, KG ensures children of all abilities have the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive together.

Advancing the Vision of Inclusive Education

Building an inclusive society cannot be done alone. To help formulate inclusive policies for the future, AWWA actively collaborates with the government to share its expertise and works closely with partners in the sector. In 2016, KG partnered with NIE to evaluate stakeholder perception of inclusion. Mr Tim Oei, then CEO of AWWA, noted the "overwhelming and positive responses" that validated AWWA's philosophy that children are inherently unconcerned with differences among peers. In 2017, in a significant

policy shift, MSF announced a feasibility study to explore the setting up of more inclusive preschools.

ECDA's Inclusive Preschool Workgroup (2021), of which Karthik was a member, recommended bolstering support for inclusion within Singapore's preschool sector. The Workgroup used KG as a benchmark to assess how the model could be replicated across Singapore.



AWWA Inclusion Experts Series. (2019)

As the first preschool of its kind in Singapore, KG laid the groundwork for best practices in inclusive education with a pedagogy and curriculum that accommodates children of all abilities. Through the AWWA Inclusion Expert Series (AIES), AWWA supports sector-wide capability building and knowledge sharing. These expert-led sessions, which are free of charge and open to all, bring together renowned practitioners and thought leaders from Singapore and beyond to explore diverse topics and share insights on fostering inclusive environment. To date, over 15 editions of AIES have been conducted, benefitting over 3,000 participants. Building on this mission, AWWA launched include.sg in 2021, an online self-help resource portal designed to strengthen inclusion in the education sector. With content curated for the Singapore context, this free portal equips individuals with resources to become effective advocates for inclusive education.

Reflecting on the progress made, AWWA Director of Disability and Inclusion Ms Ng Lee Lee asserts, "We did move the needle. When we set up KG, one of our aims was advocacy, and the fact that more inclusive preschools have popped up over the years shows us that we have been instrumental in transforming the early childhood sector."

Professor Kenneth Poon commended KG's role for its contributions to the sector, saying, "In the early childhood space, KG has really been one of the pieces (where) AWWA has pushed the boundaries, and as a result, led in the early childhood inclusion movement nationally." KG has played a pivotal role in helping the community embrace the reality of diversity, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of its value to society.

6

Adult Services

CHAPTER SIX

“Being able to maximise choice and control for adults of all abilities to not just live, but to live well and with dignity, is at the heart of all that we do.”

Ms Ng Lee Lee

Director, Disability & Inclusion, AWWA.

Foray into Adult Disability Services

While AWWA had made significant strides in supporting children and youths with additional needs, a gap remained in addressing the challenges of adults with multiple disabilities. Recognising this, AWWA's Personal Care Service (Disability Plus) or PCS (D Plus), supported by the NCSS, piloted the Me Too! Club from 2015 to 2018. Over the course of three years, more than

100 thoughtfully planned activities and outings reduced social isolation, fostered community inclusion, and provided much-needed respite for caregivers.

These activities mirrored everyday experiences – simple yet meaningful moments like playing a game or sharing a meal. With the support of



AWWA client, Idham, receiving support from AWWA Personal Care Service. (2017)



Groundbreaking ceremony of AWWA Home and Day Activity Centre with (left to right) Ms Chung Wei Han (then Vice-Chair, AWWA), Mr Chun Junyuan (Director, Rankine & Hill), Ms Ng Lee Lee (Director, Disability & Inclusion, AWWA), Mr Titus Tay (Director, ECAS Consultants Pte Ltd), Mr J R Karthikeyan (CEO, AWWA), Mr Sam Tan (Minister of State), Ms Janice Ang (then Chairman, AWWA), Dr Alvin Tan (Director, Ministry of Social and Family Development), Ms Grace Ng (Manager, Ministry of Social and Family Development), Ms Tjong Jiayu (Architect, AGA Architects). (2019)



AWWA Home and Day Activity Centre commenced operations in September 2022.

over 100 dedicated volunteers, these shared experiences fostered strong bonds and improved social skills. As volunteer Mr Liang Xian Loong shared, "Caring for them soon felt like caring for my own family."

While AWWA PCS (D Plus) continued to serve over 40 clients through home-based personal

care services, there remained a need for more comprehensive, long-term support for adults with multiple disabilities. Building on this foundation, AWWA expanded its services in 2020 by launching an adult disability home and day activity centre, reaffirming its commitment to empowering adults with disabilities to live with dignity and inclusion.

Where Every Ability Counts: The AWWA Home and Day Activity Centre

Located in a quiet neighbourhood of Pasir Ris, the AWWA Home and Day Activity Centre (AH and DAC) stands out for its contemporary design, lush greenery, airy rooms, and a tranquil ambience. Since the facility opened in September 2022, both services have served as a haven for adults with moderate to severe physical and multiple disabilities.

The idea of operating AH and DAC germinated when AWWA saw the need to further strengthen its disability continuum of care in the post-18 space. Speaking in 1997 on AWWA's vision for the next millennium, Mrs Tambyah said, "We may

not be able to cater to every single need of each client, but our Constitution encompasses the care of the underprivileged from infancy to old age."

Further impetus came from the experience AWWA gained by running a special education school and an after-school care centre, catered to children and youths between the ages of 7 to 18 years. Operating HPCS since 2014 also afforded AWWA insights into the needs of clients who were confined to their homes due to various health reasons.



Residents' room in AWWA Home.



With guidance from Care Specialist Wai Loong (left), AWWA Home client Alvin (right) waters plants within the residential facility.

While there were plenty of programmes for the young and the elderly, adults with multiple disabilities had limited support. Ever conscious of the need to support caregivers, AWWA looked for ways to alleviate the physical and mental exhaustion often experienced by older caregivers. According to Ms Janice Ang, former AWWA Chairman, "It was always at the back of our minds that something had to be done for these children

who had been with us since young and were now adults ready to leave school. They would have nowhere to go, especially if they lacked family support."

When an opening came up, AWWA was happy to take on the responsibility of operating AH and DAC.

DAC: Creating Connections, Nurturing Potential

AH and DAC are more than care facilities. They are centres for integration and development where clients are equipped with the skills needed to live independently within the community. This approach enhances clients' lives and enriches society by promoting inclusivity and understanding.

Commissioned by MSF, AWWA DAC provides a secure, supportive environment for up to 50 clients. It allows them to be active in the community and provides their caregivers with respite and hope that the clients are meaningfully engaged throughout the day.

Clients are provided the right support by leveraging a multi-professional team consisting of coaches, psychologists, therapists, and social workers that creates a holistic care plan for clients based on their unique needs.

Keeping in mind how important learning and reinforcement are, weekly activities are meticulously planned with a focus on group-based activities. In addition, the resources utilised are tailored to individual abilities to ensure they gain maximum benefit. Activities range from shopping and arts and crafts to adapted sports, all designed to enhance social integration. Clients



The therapy area at AWWA DAC.



AWWA DAC clients participating in their weekly grocery shopping activity at Loyang Point.

are encouraged to access community resources such as local shops, and public transport and practice Activities of Daily Living (ADL) like basic hygiene, grooming, and health care. This hands-on approach helps clients lead more fulfilling and independent lives. Noting that successful integration requires active two-way participation, efforts are made to build public awareness and compassion. These include engaging officers from the Singapore Police Force to help them better understand adults with additional needs and the team at Pasir Ris Public Library to showcase the artwork of AH and DAC clients. They also provide a chance for clients to visit the library and work on their social skills.

Clients participate in meal preparation activities, such as independently preparing simple dishes such as mashed potatoes or fruit salad. As a lead-up to the activity, they practise recognising ingredient lists and observing basic road safety rules when travelling out. They are taken to the neighbourhood supermarket for shopping, where they select items they need and pay for them. Although challenging, AWWA's adult disability programme has melded well in its surroundings, and despite the programmes being new, it has earned the understanding and support of their neighbours in the vicinity.

Innovative Spaces for Therapy and Recreation

AWWA wanted to spread its wings without compromising on quality. The thoughtfully designed AH and DAC building facilitates ease of movement and interaction. The wide corridors have parking stations for wheelchairs strategically located next to the staff stations. Social spaces where clients, caregivers, and volunteers interact create an inclusive, comfortable and welcoming work environment. An on-site, well-equipped kitchen caters to the nutritional needs of the clients.

DAC comprises three main areas, each equipped with advanced technological features and resources. These facilities include gamified therapy that engages clients to play individually or with each other and win rewards. The Immersive Room within AH offers sensory stimulation. Infrared motion sensors and remote patient monitoring ensure continuous client safety.

In-house therapists work on rehabilitation, exercises and assistive devices. 3D printing technology is used to create devices like Braille blocks, which are printed for those with low vision, and customised utensils for persons with limited mobility. Therapeutic activities and games are organised to maintain the functional status of each client based on their needs and preferences.

AWWA's social workers play a crucial role in supporting clients and their family members in long-term care planning and transition to services. They work with clients to identify, assess, and help address their psychosocial and emotional care issues, such as loss and grief, caregiver stress, financial matters, or other family concerns.



AWWA client Gunaseelan (right), accompanied by his brother, Suresh (left), who is his primary caregiver.

In an example of how AWWA strives to support clients across different life stages, Gunaseelan began his AWWA journey as a student at AWWA School. He was found to be eligible for AWWA's Home Personal Care Service. Through the programme, Gunaseelan benefitted from maintenance exercises, mind-stimulating activities and day-to-day assistance. The young man has since moved to DAC, where he continues to practise daily and community living skills.

When AH resident Lok Tin came to AWWA, he had restricted mobility and was struggling to remain socially engaged. The AH team helped the 52-year-old transition to a customised wheelchair, allowing him to participate in arts and crafts activities, sports, and outings. Regular physiotherapy has helped improve his mobility and quality of life.

AH: A Place We Call Home

AH provides a sense of belonging, a safe environment and long-term residential care to adults with disabilities who are unable to live independently while providing respite to caregivers. Originally named the Adult Disability Home, it has been renamed AWWA Home to signify inclusivity. This facility can accommodate up to 300 clients.

Care specialists at AH work closely with nursing aides, healthcare assistants, psychologists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, and more to provide holistic care and support for the physical and psychosocial well-being of the clients. AH is equipped with essential medical and mobility aids such as hospital beds and shower chairs. It also incorporates primary medical care and dietary advice to keep clients healthy. Clients are trained to use their mobility aids within AH and outside.

There have been many heartwarming examples that testify to AWWA's good work. AH resident Jason is diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia and is a wheelchair user. His mother shared that as she grew old and frail, it became increasingly difficult for her to attend to his daily needs. Being able to have Jason reside in AH was a huge relief

for her. She visits him several times a week and is comforted that her son is living well at AH.

Both AH and DAC run on the philosophy of empowerment through participation in an evidence-based, individualised, active support model. The aspiration is to create a home without walls, like the kampongs of old, where clients seamlessly integrate within their neighbourhood.

Visitors to the AH and DAC feel a sense of upliftment. This is partly a credit to Ms Ng Lee Lee, Director, Disability and Inclusion at AWWA, who led the design and programme framework for both AH and DAC and who is all heart when it comes to clients in her care. "For every adult that walks through our doors, we work with them to understand their right to be a part of a larger community and a valued member of society. Being able to maximise choice and control for adults of all abilities to not just live, but to live well and with dignity, is at the heart of all that we do. I am personally driven to bridge the health and social divide for adults with additional needs, and I will do all I can to work with our partners to push the needle of what is possible for the collective good of those we serve," she says.



The Spirit of Volunteerism

CHAPTER SEVEN

Standing Tall on the Shoulders of Giants

AWWA started off as a volunteer-run organisation made up of well-educated women who were primarily homemakers. Whether it was the disadvantaged people from the lowest rung of society at the FSC, the children with multiple handicaps, or the elderly residents of SCH, volunteers at AWWA have been quiet partners in many of its key milestones.

Trailblazing Advocates of Empowerment



25 years of service to the community (from left to right) Mrs Kula, Mrs Anand, Mrs Tambyah, and Ms Fung. (1995)

Today, volunteers continue to be the lifeblood of the organisation. Paving the way were Mrs Kula and Mrs Tambyah, both women of substance who were strong advocates of providing dignity to the less empowered members of society. Old-timers remember how when faced with a roadblock, Mrs Kula would confidently go on with

her work and do her utmost to push through and persevere. For her services to AWWA, Mrs Kula was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1985 and the Public Service Star in 1992. Serving and sharing was a way of life for her. She once said, "Sharing even the little that we have. It doesn't always have to be money. It could be a little of



Mrs Anand (centre, pouring drinks), helping out at the Kalyana Mandapam, where AWWA's Family Welfare Service used to operate from.

our time or energy, or talent or possessions used in the service of those round us. At least it can be a few kind words." Mrs Kula had the distinction of leading AWWA as its President for a total of six terms and was the recipient of the first AWWA Outstanding Service Reward.

Mrs Tambyah joined AWWA in 1972, and her "never-say-die" spirit remains synonymous with AWWA. Recalling how Mrs Tambyah had mentored her, Ms Ang Bee Lian, who later became CEO at NCSS, said, "Mrs Tambyah had a pioneering spirit that was infectious. In her inimitable way, she

would keep nudging those who are around her to speak for those who are vulnerable."

Mrs Tambyah dedicated her life to helping others and firmly believed that differently-abled children should be a part of the regular educational system and be given opportunities to learn, live and work like other typically-developing children. Thousands of children with additional needs and their families have her to thank for espousing their cause. She supervised AWWA School and was Chairperson of TEACH ME. Mrs Tambyah was honoured with the Public Service Medal (1984),



(Front row, from left to right) Mrs Tambyah, Ms Sim Ann, then Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and Mrs Seah during a visit to AWWA School. (2012)

the Community Chest Special Volunteer Award (1991), and the Public Service Star (1994). Mrs Tambyah was often referred to as a lady with the “nerves of steel and a heart of gold”.

Alongside Mrs Kula and Mrs Tambyah, was Mrs Anand as the third pillar of AWWA. A self-effacing and quiet lady, she insists that all she did was follow her heart. “I had the time,” says the two-

time AWWA President, “and I gave it to the service of the underprivileged in Singapore. AWWA became my vehicle in this journey. In terms of happiness and peace of mind, I received more than I gave.” A lifelong member, she was actively involved in various capacities at AWWA for nearly 38 years and is happy at the way the organisation has continued to flourish.

Many Helping Hands

Volunteers have always been a valuable resource for AWWA, including former First Lady, Mrs Urmila Nathan, who was the Vice Chairman of AWWA's Welfare Fund from 1981 to 1988.

Over the years, countless others stepped in to support AWWA. One example is Mrs Sandra Berrick, who brought her professional expertise to teach children with special needs and remained

associated with AWWA for over 30 years before returning to Australia. In 2012, AWWA received the President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards in recognition of its role in harnessing the talents, expertise and hearts of people in Singapore towards serving its clients. Today, over 1,000 corporate and community volunteer touchpoints are recorded across AWWA's 27 programmes and services annually.



Mrs Urmila Nathan with a student during the official opening of ACCESS. (2006)



Mrs Sandra Berrick.



AWWA conferred the President's Award for Volunteerism (Non-Profit). (2012)

Keeping the Flame Alive



AWWA seniors at the Singapore Sustainable Gallery with volunteers from PUB.

As AWWA's responsibilities and services grew, it was imperative to strengthen the organisation's capability and capacity with paid employees and sector experts in the workforce. This enabled AWWA to serve more social and community needs, and persons across life stages.

AWWA Board Director Ms Ng Chin Yu explains that corporatisation was a logical progression, and it was necessary for AWWA to transform from a society to a company limited by guarantee (CLG). Mr N. Subramaniam, former Chairperson of the AWWA Audit Committee, became the first male member of the AWWA Board. Focused on tightening the governance and financial sustainability of the organisation, he became a valued member of the task force established in 2014 to look into converting AWWA into a CLG. This was backed by his strong belief on the importance of the CLG structure to protect

members and directors from liabilities. The CLG efforts were led by Board Director and former AWWA Chairman Ms Chung Wei Han, who mentioned that while compliance requirements for a CLG may be onerous and the initial work may be challenging, it would make for more robust governance, which was important for the long-term continuity of AWWA. She elaborated, "When the CLG was incorporated on January 7, 2015, I felt that AWWA had grown from a child, tied to its loving founders and members from its birth in 1970, into a full-grown adult!"

Volunteers, however, continue to remain a much-needed service for AWWA. They help the community to understand, experience, and empathise with clients. Corporate groups have always been staunch supporters of AWWA. Along with individual and group supporters, corporate groups have not only raised funds



Corporate volunteers from BlackRock march alongside our clients at the Purple Parade 2024, Singapore's largest disability and inclusion movement.

for specific needs to supplement government grants but have also generously given their time to help AWWA achieve its mission. The AWWA Board of Directors and members of its Board Committees and advisory panels are still made up of volunteers who spend valuable time sharing their experience, professional knowledge, and expertise in developing strategies and policies to take AWWA forward.

As we turn the pages of AWWA's rich history and look towards the future, it is evident that AWWA's journey has been impactful and filled with

purpose. AWWA has continually broken new ground and actively addressed community needs, often pioneering services that set standards across the sector. Its achievements are not just milestones, but stepping stones to greater possibilities.

Just like how it was started 55 years ago, AWWA continues to move forward with hope, determination and the shared vision of creating a community where everyone, regardless of their background or abilities, can thrive.

Stability begets loyalty, and loyalty begets ownership. What we own we will cherish and nurture to the best of our ability. When we become members of an organisation whether it be at management level as staff or regular volunteers, we become part-owners of that organisation and are committed to all that goes (in)to making it a success.

Mrs Tambyah

Afterword



**Mr J R Karthikeyan
(Karthik)**

AWWA Chief Executive Officer

I'll let you in on a little secret. This history book of ours, wasn't exactly planned. With AWWA having grown to a large agency with 27 different services that operate out of 17 different locations, every day feels like a whirlwind of activities. At any point during operating hours, a myriad of songs may be sung during Circle Time as part of early intervention, a chat with a ministerial agency partner may occur at another, and perhaps in another centre, an AWWAcademy learning module creator may be experiencing anxiety and fussing over every square inch of content for their very first e-module, to ensure optimal learning for the rest of the staff across the organisation. Amidst the flurry of activities, and a schedule that's constantly packed with back-to-back meetings (that constantly leaves me hangry) one day, I found myself pausing, to just be present, in the now.

You know how sometimes, you just pause, and your thoughts start racing, and you start thinking, "What am I seeing? Do I understand the full extent of my actions? Was it worth getting upset yesterday to learn that a project wasn't moving as quickly as I'd wanted? Why is people management easier on some days than others? Why can't there be better vegetarian food options in the vicinity? Does anyone understand how much work has gone into building our capability and capacity over the years? I mean, sure, it's unfair and not the most meaningful to compare ourselves to our founders because of how much they've given, but it surely makes you think. After all, I've only been in AWWA for 18 years. And 18 years in a 55-year history is nothing impressive. It's just 1/3 of the time that AWWA's been around for. Wait. What? Has it been that long? Doesn't this mean, I've been around for...33% of AWWA's history?"



Mr Desmond Lee, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for National Development, (middle) visits Kindie Garden. (2018)

And then it hit me, as a whole wave of emotions washed over me. Everything from memories, to hopes for the future, to frustrations, tears, joy and everything else in between. We really have come a long way, but because of how much of AWWA I've been a part of, and how much of AWWA is a part of me, I'm so hopeful that we still have a long road ahead for us to continue to stand in the gap and do better. And we are who we are today, because of the giants of the past. It is their blood, sweat, tears, heart and shoulders that we stand on. And just like that, it was decided. Our rich history had to be documented with an archive of key milestones, figures and facts, which would then be fleshed out further into a book with content that honours the sacrifices of those from the past, recognises the work of those from the now, and encourages hope and determination in the hearts of those of tomorrow, to build a more inclusive society.

To some, turning 55 isn't a big deal. To me, 55 is significant, when it comes with multiple policy-changing initiatives that have lasting positive

impacts on the fabric of the society we live in. One of the many things I've learned is that we can't solve or address every issue. We've got to have strategic minds, willing hearts and pragmatic optimism (it's a thing), to guide us in upholding our mission of improving the participation of those we serve. With that, my team and I are committed to:

- Building bridges to bring more robust care into the community so that seniors remain active and can continuously thrive across health stages beyond acute medical settings
- Uplifting vulnerable families who are from lower-income households or are displaced, by supporting them to overcome increasingly dynamic and challenging life situations
- Building capability within the common early childhood and early intervention ecosystem by introducing inclusive best practices, so that the sectoral workforce is better equipped to help all young learners and those with development needs receive the very best in their formative years



Mr Karthik (right) with Ms Fam (middle) and Mrs Tambyah (left).

- Supporting the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals and their networks of support so that they may be well integrated in the community throughout different life stages
- Expanding AWWA's therapy hub to serve more clients through home therapy and to support complex medical cases in the community so that our clients can age in place and with joy, in the company of friends and loved ones
- Bridging the gap between disability and the medical needs of the post-18 community and their networks of support
- Increasing continuous improvements and innovation efforts to provide relevant, high-quality and person-centred services as we concurrently leverage the scale of our work and navigate the challenges of being a complex, multi-service agency

Singapore is a small, but highly developed nation, and the current social issues that arise as a result of that, vary greatly, when compared to the issues

that AWWA's founders advocated for. Matters like clean water supply, infant mortality, widespread poverty and access to basic education are no longer major issues of concern. Rather, the role of the SSA has evolved. In today's day and age, how do we foster partnerships, strengthen capability and increase awareness of less-than-apparent issues that plague families from middle-income households who on the surface, may seem independent and appear to be well-functioning?

Essentially, what does a progressive, courageous multi-service SSA that addresses relevant social issues in 21st century Singapore look like? I may not have all the answers, but I know this. Just like AWWA was started by Asian women to be a beacon of hope for those in need over half a century ago, I owe it to them (to some extent, as an Asian man) to continue to rally a community of support made up of our staff, our clients, partners and members of society to combine our many helping hands and shape fulfilling lives for all.

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