

Caregiver support is like a beacon to families

BRIAN HEW

Caregiver to his sister, Hew Kuen Yee

“A barista. That’s my ideal job,” quips Brian. We were meeting in a hipster café known for its ambience and specialty roasts. One would think that being in his dream workplace would make it easier for him to share his story with us, but a painful topic remains difficult to talk about, no matter where. The consolation he had was that his sister, Kuen Yee was well looked after until she passed away. “Kuen Yee was someone who knew how to take care of herself. She’d take the effort to buy fruits from the market and go for the most organic of meat and vegetables. She made sure she was putting good stuff in her diet. But cancer doesn’t discriminate. And it hits you the hardest when you’re in your prime.”

It was by accident that Kuen Yee, a lawyer, found out about her cancer. While trying on a sports bra as part of her preparation for a marathon, she stumbled upon a lump in her breast. After a series of check-up, it was confirmed as breast cancer. Stage 3 by then. She was in her early 50s.

“We didn’t know what to make of it. We all thought with advanced medical sciences nowadays, she’d pull through,” Brian continues. “I know my sister to be strong. She not only had her mind set on completing the chemo, she had planned to get back to work as well.” But Kuen Yee didn’t respond well to chemo. It came like a slap to the family. As a grown man capable of carrying 2 men on his back, Brian admitted that when it came to his sister, he couldn’t do anything for her. “A lump of clay” was how he felt about himself. Until Hospis Malaysia came into the picture.

“We knew what it meant when the doctor referred us to a hospice. It was a matter of time before the inevitable was to take place. Still Hospis Malaysia was like a cushion to us,” Brian says. It also dawned upon them that taking care of someone who isn’t able-bodied is different. More so when there are emotional ties involved. That was why they welcomed Hospis Malaysia right from the start. They knew at least, their sister would be well supported. And so would they.

So they brought her back home and started her post-hospital life “anew” with Hospis Malaysia guiding them all the way. “Nurses would come round to check on us. They were always available with guidance even when they were not there. They would explain things that made sense to us and gave us layman answers. I take my hats off to the team because they really know how to deal with what we consider as a difficult situation,” Brian observes. They managed his sister’s pain, fever and seizures.

When they knew that she wasn’t going to recover, the team counselled and prepared the family for what to expect. This made it so much easier for them to let their sister go.

“They looked after both the patient and us. It wasn’t sympathy they were offering. It’s them sharing their experience with us that helped us understand things better.” Many a times, it’s not just what they said. It’s how they said it that made the difference. As Brian puts it, it was the tonality, inflection and bedside manners of the nurses that helped make his sister and them as caregivers cope better.



Brian reflecting on his sister's journey

Towards her last days, Kuen Yee was for the most part comfortable in seeing someone beside her, despite her not being very communicative by then. “Hospis Malaysia proved to be a great help. Just knowing that someone is there and offering sound advice was comforting,” Brian remarks. Being at home gave them all a peace of mind.

Somewhere amidst the pain reflected in his eyes as he revisits in his mind the final leg of his sister’s journey, there is a sense of serenity. “It’s unfortunate that she had to go,” Brian quietly says. “But she departed with dignity.”



How Hospis Malaysia supported:

- Symptom management
- Acknowledged caregivers’ needs and distress and provided support
- Handled anticipatory grief

