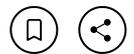


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'Like a buddy': The 62-year-old ex-offender who found a mentor in a 27-year-old lawyer

BY SAMUEL NG



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Ooi Boon Keong/TODAY

From left: Former convict James Radha; Mr Andrew Ong, assistant director of partnerships at HCSA Community Service; and Mr Jarvis Go, a Step Up mentor.

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They have since become friends and plan to stay in touch beyond the programme

The first round of the programme was launched in January this year

HCSA plans to launch a second round in February 2023

SINGAPORE — Whenever 62-year-old James Radha needs help, advice or a listening ear, the first number he calls is that of 27-year-old lawyer Jarvis Go.

Given the vast age gap, the two may seem an unlikely pair of buddies, but since they were matched through a mentorship programme in March this year, Mr Radha has come to rely on Mr Go's counsel in times of need, while Mr Go says that when his work gets tough, he is motivated by thoughts of Mr Radha's resilience and dedication to his job as a logistics worker.

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Contrary to what one might assume, it is Mr Go, a young finance lawyer from Allen & Overy, who is the mentor, and Mr Radha, an ex-convict, who is the mentee.

The mentorship programme that brought them together is Step Up, run by charitable organisation HCSA Community Services, created to help ex-offenders navigate challenges in re-integrating into the wider community.

The programme was launched in January this year, with a first batch of 14 mentees matched with mentors from four of HCSA's corporate partners — Allen & Overy, DBS Bank, Far East Organisation and Värde Partners.

The mentees are alumni of HCSA Highpoint Halfway House or HCSA's Dayspring Residential Treatment Centre (DRTC) for girls who have gone through multi-faceted trauma.

Each mentor-mentee pair get six sessions together, although the exact duration, location and format of the meetings are left up to each individual pair to determine.

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With the first batch of participants nearing the end of their six sessions, HCSA says it hopes to expand the programme.

HCSA plans to launch a second round of the programme in February.

FROM MENTEE TO FRIEND

Mr Radha has served four jail terms, mostly on charges relating to violence, and has been in and out of prison since he was 18.

Most recently, he was convicted of 145 charges including common assault and spent 20 years in prison before his release in 2018.

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"Violence was the main reason (for my convictions)," he told TODAY in an interview. "Even from my early childhood, I used to be very violent. Until today, I still have this problem."

But he added that he doesn't see himself reoffending anymore, as he can now manage his violent tendencies better thanks to his religion and Step Up.

"If I ever run into any problems, if I want to talk to someone, if I need any ideas, help or advice, I know where to go. The first number will be his," Mr Radha said of Mr Go.

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Ex-convict James Radha

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'I HAD MORE CONFIDENCE TO REAFFIRM MY NEW SELF'

Mr Jarvis Go, said that he viewed Mr Radha as one of his friends, and that the sessions take place "organically".

"Normally, we just start talking about life," said Mr Go.

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So Mr Go advised his mentee to try to talk to them.

"So you give advice to him, just like that. It's more of being a buddy," said Mr Go.

"At work, when it gets busy with many deadlines looming, I often think about James' resilience and dedication to his job and counselling responsibilities, and that is often enough to motivate me to continue working hard and pursue my own professional goals."

Mr Radha shared that his anger issues have decreased since he became baptised as a Roman Catholic in 2007, and that his mentorship sessions have helped him in his reintegration journey.

"Through the mentorship sessions with Jarvis, I had more confidence to reaffirm my new self, see how much I have progressed, and gain clarity on my goals," he said. "They (HCSA) helped me find my way to obtaining the right skills to become a counsellor."

He has attended workshops and is now a counsellor for the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry, where he volunteers every week.

He said he intends to remain friends with Mr Go after their six sessions under Step Up end.

"There are some things you cannot talk to your mother (about). You can't talk to your father (about). Can't talk even to your sister or wife. But you can talk to a friend... if I can have more mentors, I want more," he said.

TAILORED DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Step Up programme is the brainchild of Mr Ong of HCSA.

The 44-year-old is an ex-offender himself, who has been helping ex-offenders since his release from prison 20 years ago.

Through this work, he realised that ex-offenders could benefit from more support once they leave prison, specifically through a structured mentorship programme focused on their life goals.

At the start of the programme, mentors and mentees will first establish the goals of the mentee in four key areas: Personal, family, community and business.

During each session, mentors and mentees discuss how well they are progressing, what areas they need help with and any difficulties they face, with the mentor writing a progress report at the end of the session.

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“For example, if (a mentee wishes) to be a counsellor in order to help other ex-offenders like themselves, we will subsidise the course fees for the mentee to be trained and certified,” Mr Ong said.

He hopes that the programme can help ex-offenders face challenges in re-integrating, such as having limited and low-wage career opportunities.

"When they get released from the halfway house and reintegrate into society, nobody knows where they are and who they are, right? In this way we've designed something so we know we can match them with friends who want to help."

CLARIFICATION: A previous version of this article said that 13 pairs of mentors and mentees had been matched in the first round of the Step Up programme. It also said that HCSA has two corporate partners which provide the mentors. HCSA has since clarified that it had matched 14 pairs of mentors and mentees and it has four corporate partners.

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