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A COMPULSORY COURSE FOR CHILDREN

PATERMATER -
WONG BING KIN SOLOMON

“From kindergarten to university, we spend more than a decade’s time in school. Yet, the compulsory curriculum includes nothing about the parent-child relationship. To Solomon, PaterMater is a compulsory course in elderly care; it is tricky to estimate the course duration, but Solomon has set a provisional duration — a lifetime.”

On the day of the interview, 27-year-old Solomon was holding his fourth daffodil planting class in collaboration with Ying Pak Kin, the founder of Bring Parents For Fun. Despite the two of them being close in age, Solomon, with his glasses on, exuded an air of maturity and calmness. He stood next to the participants and observed their needs; when one of the “daughters” looked around, Solomon immediately attended to her and offered his assistance. Apart from organising child-parent activities to let children spend more time with their parents, PaterMater also provides practical information and advice on how to care for the elderly. This prompts the question that all children face — how should we prepare as our parents grow older?

In 2015, Solomon’s parents were just entering their retirement years and still in good health. While he thought that things would go on as usual for his parents, his mother’s experience at a fast food restaurant struck him. “She told me that she had spent the whole morning sitting in a fast food restaurant, surrounded by seniors in their 70s and 80s. She asked me, ‘So do I have to sit there for the next 20 years?’” This conversation made Solomon realise that his mother was getting older; it also made him think about children’s role in their parents’ lives from when they first retire to when their physical abilities decline, or even when they pass away. “I decided on the name PaterMater before any concrete planning was made because the project was dedicated to parents,” Solomon said.

CHOICES AT CROSSROADS

Ever since he conceived the concept, Solomon alone has been responsible for deciding on the direction, content, and promotion. But one person can only do so much; while he can manage his time and workload step by step, the most challenging part for him is decision making. “The first decision I had to make was whether to quit my job.” After graduation, Solomon has worked as a corporate finance analyst at BNP Paribas, and as an executive assistant to the president of Link REIT. He has also worked in real estate investment. It was undoubtedly a promising career path. But six months after starting PaterMater, Solomon was about to take on another deal at work, which meant that he would not have time for the project for a few months. “If I chose to stay for another deal, I would have to work till 2 am for a few months, which meant I would have to let go of the work I’ve done for PaterMater in the past six months. I discussed this with my girlfriend, and she was very supportive of me continuing my work in PaterMater. If it wasn’t for her support,

it would’ve been very difficult for me to decide in such a short time,” Solomon said with a smile.

The decision to resign was not an impulsive one, as Solomon had already saved up enough for a year’s expenses, as well as getting additional medical insurance before he resigned. From what he said, he seemed to be pragmatic, with his future well thought out. “My girlfriend thought of the worst-case scenario for me. Even after working on the project for two or three years, I would still only be 28 or 29 years old by then. It would be no big deal. Although I have invested a sum of money, I could just think of it as getting a master’s degree in gerontology. I would be doing internships at different organisations for the project, and at least I would learn how to take care of my own parents — even if I don’t need to do it yet, the moment will come.”



300 HOURS TO BECOME A HEALTH WORKER

The first step he took after resigning was to get a health worker's licence to work in a home for the elderly. "It was my girlfriend's idea. She thought that if I was to do a project with the elderly, I might as well get to know a bit more about their needs." To get a health worker's licence, one has to take 300 hours of classes, eight hours a day for two months consecutively, and read two books that are thicker than dictionaries. "At one point, I realised these two books were just an introduction to elderly care. How would a regular office worker know how to take care of the elderly?" Solomon's voice rose in amazement.

During his internship at a home for the elderly, Solomon had to change diapers, feed the elderly, and help them take showers, just like a regular care worker. He readily accepted all the tasks which most people would consider unpleasant, because he would be able to observe the needs of the elderly during the process. He once saw an old lady with angina who often acted up and refused to eat, so the

staff would call her son, which turned out to be a sure-fire way to help.

"It was amazing. Whenever her son came to visit her, she would not need to be fed, eat everything herself, and even drink all the soup. The elderly don't necessarily need a nice environment or nice facilities when they get old. What they want most is to be loved and to have company. That made me feel from the bottom of my heart that it was right to start PaterMater."

Solomon said with determination in his eyes.



“GUESS WHERE I PUT THE DAFFODIL?”

Solomon’s parents have participated in child-parent activities held by PaterMater, such as Thai boxing, eco-tours and tea tasting sessions. His father made new friends during the tea tasting activity and even inscribed the flowerpots for the daffodil class. His mother has become the coach of the massage class. PaterMater became a bridge between Solomon and his parents, bringing their lives in sync. “I used to get so annoyed when they asked me about work, but now when I get home, my dad would ask me, ‘Guess where I put the Daffodil?’ It’s cute and fun,” he laughed.

In the three years since Solomon started PaterMater, the bonus for him was getting closer to his parents and spending more time with them.



“I have no regrets about this experience. I’ve always been rather rational when communicating with my family, and I seldom share my feelings. But I’ve done so many activities with them now and interacted with them so much more — that is already worth it.”

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SEARCHING FOR AN EXIT FOR URBAN DWELLERS

POKEGUIDE –
HUI PUI YIN BRIAN