

UNFORGETTABLE SATISFACTION

From the world of films to the museum, not only does an audio describer broaden the horizons of the visually impaired, but also create opportunities for communication. “The biggest difference from film description is that we end each section by asking for questions and feedback from the visitors. Once, after a visitor saw the ‘camel’, they said, ‘It’s a Bactrian camel. I had seen one before I lost my eyesight.’” Evoking memories through touch and provoking imagination through colourful descriptions – to Dawning, the smiles of satisfaction and praise on the visitors’ faces are her greatest motivation.

“After watching a film, they can discuss the plot with us. After seeing an exhibition, they say it was great. These simple gestures and praises are more than enough,”

Dawning smiled with satisfaction.

Dawning’s personality and professionalism have guided her through her career in audio description. On the way, she discovered an unexpected talent, like the

visually impaired. “When I was a teacher, I never imagined that I could establish an association. Despite their visual impairment, these people have a lot of creative ideas and can achieve a lot. The problem is whether we assume that they cannot see or cannot do something. Why can’t we just have faith in their ability and possibility?”



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PIONEERS OF TRANSFORMING THE “INDUSTRY OF HUMANS”

WITH YOU OUT-PATIENT ESCORT SERVICES – WU WAI TUNG AND EMILY

“Here, we have four church friends with different personalities from different backgrounds. Like many Hongkongers, they have to take care of seniors who suffer from illnesses at home. In the long days of providing care and under the helplessness of using out-patient escort services, these four carers decided to go a step further and transform themselves from service users to revolutionary pioneers.”

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Wu Wai Tung (Ah-tung) is young, but she has been close to illnesses and death since her childhood. Her mother, two uncles, and aunt all passed away because of cancer in the last ten years, while her grandmother has suffered from two strokes. Ah-tung is used to going to hospitals after school and after work. From a young age, she has already learnt that cancer patients feel cold easily, so she should bring items to keep them warm when escorting them to the hospital and pour some hot water for them once they arrive. She has also packed emergency hospital bags for her family many times — when they have to call an ambulance, she would take the bag and go.

This is her daily life.

IT ALL STARTED FROM HELPLESSNESS

Similar to Ah-tung, Emily has a grandmother who suffers from osteodystrophy. Emily’s mother used to take care of her grandmother, but now her grandmother has moved to a home for the elderly. “In the treatment room, doctors seem to ask questions at the computer monitor instead of you. If you can’t get to the point, like my mother, the doctor will keep saying the same things, that this is what happens to all seniors, that she just has to keep taking medicine.”

Emily realised that her mother was unable to relay her grandmother’s condition after visits to the doctor. On the other hand, Ah-tung was overloaded with work and hired an escort attendant for out-patient visits, but the escort attendant was unable to clearly tell her about the health condition afterwards. Ah-tung told us: “Escort attendants are mostly freelancers. In Hong Kong, there are never enough nurses or caretakers, and there is no assurance of quality. Sometimes, the escort attendants could be someone referred to us by neighbours or acquaintances from a day care centre, and they may not be

professionally trained. Health workers and nurses have a well-established registration system in Hong Kong, but not escort attendants. My grandmother lived alone at the time, so I could not meet the escort attendant easily, and there was no reporting system for the escort service either. Not only did it make providing better care for my family hard, but also led to communication problems within the family.”

At the hospital, they often witness similar communication problems in other families — patients in the adjacent bed or chair and their family seem to care about each other, but they would hurt each other unintentionally because of a lack of understanding. Everyone was helpless and tired.

Ah-tung came up with an idea: creating a mobile application for escort attendants to record the medical appointment, so that they can help the patient’s family more. She didn’t think very far, but she soon realised that no escort attendant would use the app. “It was impossible to

make them report everything when escort attendant services generally only entail accompaniment.” So she gathered three church friends to “make it big”, including Emily, Phoebe, an accountant who has a nursing qualification, and Alfred, Ah-tung’s former supervisor who works in IT. “We treated it as an experiment. During the trial, we directly hired five or six escort attendants to test the app. We accompanied them on their escort trips to get immediate feedback on the app. We got 30 cases in 3 months and fine-tuned the app according to the feedback from the escort attendants and the patients’ family; for example, we broke down the report to make it easier to understand.” The app lists details of the medical appointment, such as the public transport taken, the waiting time, as well as the doctor’s advice, like switching medication and new treatment plans; the report is sent to family members the same evening. Ah-tung gave the app a neat and direct name — “With You”. The trial was very successful, and as the app filled a gap in the market, the team has now expanded to more than 20 staff members, handling nearly 300 cases. “I don’t want to simply expand our service size. We only take cases within our capability. Since launching the app, we’ve turned down over half of the

service requests — those cases were too complicated to deal with, and we didn’t want to put the patients in any risk,” said Ah-tung.

Ah-tung is not planning to profit from this project. Her motivation was never her optimism in helping others, but her own frustrating experience of being unable to help her family:

“I helped them buy things and made them more comfortable, but I couldn’t change their health conditions. In the end, I could only watch them pass away.”

Neither could the app help her beloved aunt. Diagnosed with cancer, her aunt asked if they could find an escort attendant that would work in Tung Chung, but they could not.

“ They developed a helpful app and built a matching platform to provide professional escort services for out-patient visits. Carers can easily search for professional escort attendants and communicate with them, allowing carers to entrust the patients to them with confidence. “This is a trait of someone in IT: if there’s no suitable tool, I’ll create one,” Ah-tung said cheerfully. ”

HELPING THE CARERS TO LET THEM TAKE CARE OF THEIR FAMILY

Ah-tung seems calm and rational. Despite facing numerous helpless moments, she managed to focus on things that she could “help a bit”.

“After I started working in escort services for out-patient visits, I discovered how huge the problem of caring for seniors is in Hong Kong. The population is ageing, there’s a shortage of people joining the carer industry, and Hongkongers are busy with work. It’s common to see the ‘young old’ taking care of the ‘old old’, but they feel exhausted and lack the knowledge to be a carer, while the younger generation is unable to take up the duty. By using escort services for out-patient visits, carers can finally take a break for a few hours from their round-the-clock care, which relieves the tension of being together all the time, improving their relationship.”

Moreover, many seniors do not want their family to know about food restriction orders from the doctor. “The doctor

may ask the patient to restrict their diet, like only eating half a Chinese sausage, but they always want to eat the whole sausage. Worse still, around one-third of seniors over 80 suffer from dementia, which is not just a disease, but irreversible deterioration. The deterioration process is lengthy, eroding the patient’s self-esteem and putting great stress on their family.” At this juncture, escort attendants as third-party professionals play an important role in bridging and supporting these families in terms of communication, emotions, and knowledge.

In the interview, Ah-tung reiterated the importance of escort attendants’ professionalism, which is also her ultimate wish.

“Escort services for out-patient visits are an ‘industry of humans;”

Ah-tung took a deep breath. “I hope the quality can improve. I don’t mind others

copying our business model, as long as the overall out-patient escort services quality in Hong Kong improves.”

With You maintains long-term partnership with its freelancing escort attendants, providing labour insurance and making MPF contributions, while giving them strict professional training. The team respects their escort attendants while expecting a high service quality — this motivates the escort attendants to exhibit professionalism.

Among the thousands of escort attendants in the job market, With You has hired only 20 or so as a first step. They are yet to hire more staff because it is hard to find people with their ideology.

“But we are happy to find that quite a number of nursing students are eager to try the new service mode, while some retired carers try hard to learn to use the app. Some escort service providers also wish to collaborate with us...”

They can see the world changing.

“At the same time, we want to influence carers and teach them to take good care of their family and do their duties.”

This also made Ah-tung reflect on her own role as a carer. She finally understood why her grandmother, who is suffering from gout after being healthy half her life, finds her annoying, and why conflicts have arisen between them.

“Like most seniors, my grandma refuses to admit that her body is deteriorating and doesn’t want to be vulnerable in front of her family,” Ah-tung smiled faintly. “I finally know how to make her less angry.”

