

Our Interview with Mr Laurence Wee, Someone "Young at Heart"

By Jacelyn Tan Kah Min and Denice Yeo Si Yu



*"If you live up to 70, you have a blessing.
But if you live up to 80, you have double
blessings." - Mr Laurence Wee*

Our First Meeting with Mr Laurence Wee

The cheery disposition of Mr Wee sets the tone for a humorous yet interesting insight, on the Gerontological Society's many contributions to address the ageing landscape, as a responsible organisation spanning over three decades. Presumably, in its formative years, when it started in the mid-80s, he observed that many have not even heard of the term "gerontology" let alone understand what it stands for.

From our interview with Mr Wee, we felt he had imparted a great deal of knowledge to us. Not just knowledge confined to ageing matters and its dimension, including the social services sector, but about life in general, which we think the younger generation can benefit from his advice as well.

Meeting him for the very first time, given the expected initial awkward moments, Mr Wee easily put us at ease with his bright smiles and witty jokes. The entire "room" seemed to have brightened up! He embodied the phrase 'young at heart' with the energy he exudes, and truth be told, probably our combined energy is not much higher than his. For Mr Wee, a large part of his life was in the social service sector. He was part of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) at one point of his life. Mr Wee briefly mentioned how he used to be a civil servant before leaving the public sector, where he is mindfully grateful for the experience and development, to focus on the social service sector. As a first port of call, he joined the SPD (formerly Society for the Physically Disabled), a growing organisation that helps people with disabilities. Later, Mr Wee was an executive director, helming Presbyterian Community Services for the past 16 years.

Currently, he takes things easy, pursuing and enjoying his "structured" leisure time. Mr Wee is passionate and contributed much to the gerontology sector, which was something that he is modest about. Preferring a low profile, out of the limelight of things, Mr Wee's interest in volunteering in the ageing sector stemmed from his realisation of the multidimensional aspect of ageing, and whenever possible, to help the vulnerable in coping with the challenges for an inclusive society where older persons matter. A society for all ages.

His Experience in the Gerontological Society

Mr Wee was the past president of the Gerontological Society and still actively contributes to the society. In September 1990, together with then President Prof Kua Ee Heok, Mr Wee helped organise and execute the first ASEAN - Japan Seminar on Ageing. Also, highlighted a series of Asia Pacific Conferences on Ageing (2011-2016) together with another past president, Assoc Prof Goh Lee Gan. It was no easy feat due to the scale of such events, involving many overseas and local participants, organisations and guest speakers.

Additionally, Mr Wee is often up for the challenge and keen to explore and pick up new skills along the way. For instance, Mr Wee attempted to design a logo for the Gerontological Society in 2000 is still in use, even though designing was not his expertise. The logo symbolises ageing as a continuous and unstoppable process, combined with flexibility and the zest to try out new things, in the quest to keep on going in life, despite its many challenges.

During his volunteering time in the Gerontological society, including other volunteer commitments as well, Mr Wee understood the importance of having good time management. This proved highly effective in balancing full-time work and other

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responsibilities at hand. When asked how he could do it, he gave credit to his mentor’s recipe many years ago. Daily list of tasks needs to be written down on an A4-sized paper, date it, fold it into four neat sections. Then place it in the shirt pocket for easy retrieval and reference. This process is repeated the next day. A fresh paper with a new list for the day. Add in unfinished tasks of the previous day. This would ensure nothing is inadvertently left out for good monitoring practice. He added, whatever the system one has, it does not really matter so long as one sticks to a system of choice - for sustainability on a daily basis. Outcome is the determining factor. From this example, Mr Wee learnt the importance of planning his time well. The reverse is true, where one can easily end up idling away, distracted, leaving many matters not attended to. Hence, he encourages the younger generation to make a similar written schedule daily in order to keep things in check, and not feel overwhelmed by the tasks under one’s responsibility.

His Experience in the Ageing Sector

Another aspect, for Mr Wee, lifelong learning is an important concept that people should uphold regardless of their age. For example, he participated in a workshop where, upon completion, all participants were requested to go onstage to collect a certificate. However, in this instance, he felt it was unnecessary, though important, as he had already gained much from the proceedings and time well spent. As to Mr Wee, the learning process and the knowledge or skills gained is of greater importance than the paper itself, though important. To him it is crucial for everyone not only to develop a passion for learning, upskilling etc, but learning to keep ourselves active too. Mr Wee valued the idea of intergenerational bonding, highlighting the beauty of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of different generations and how we can learn and enrich one another through such opportunity. Mr Wee believes that older adults are an important asset to society, with their repository of experience and expertise that they must share. For us to be an inclusive society, we have to be ‘mainstream’, which means that integration has to happen. To him, integration would refer to the intergenerational bonding between the older and younger generations, whereby both generations can mutually share and learn from each other. A good example given was having a good mentor, like the late founder member of the society, Mr Henry Lim who shaped many of his values on ageing.

Mr Wee added that DEW (Diet, Exercise, Weight Control) is crucial especially when people get older. This is an essential concept for everyone regardless of their age. As he noted how when he goes to see his doctor, they will tend to resort to “social prescription” as well. Social prescribing is a concept that is currently gaining traction in the healthcare sector. Instead of merely resorting to just prescribing medicine for a specific health condition(s)

medical, doctors will prescribe their patients with social activities and encourage them to do as well. There is increasing research supporting the positive impact of people staying active in their community for good health maintenance. Furthermore, it helps curb costly healthcare expenses, for both the individual and the state in the long run. For Mr Wee, his doctors will give tips such as exercising more, being careful with the nutritional value of the food he consumes and other health-related tips, instead of just medical prescriptions per se. He learnt that this healthy combined habit of exercising and eating well is something that should start from a young age. Therefore, Mr Wee advises the younger generation to also start caring for their health, such as eating healthier or sleeping early, as this may affect their productivity in the long run. He highlighted that poor health management can implicate our performance levels while working or studying, as we may start to feel dizzy and less motivated to perform well. Additionally, in the long run, poor diet management may result in other health complications when we reach old age.

Our Takeaways from this Interview

Our biggest takeaway from this interview was the plentiful advice that Mr Wee gave us. He would emphasise how “quality” friendships is more important than its “quantity”. Especially with time, we will invariably begin to see a gradual reduction in our social circle. Additionally, the other tips he gave us regarding life were valuable takeaways that we will remember. These tips, such as the importance of time management and good health management, are valuable pointers that we can take note while in the working field or studying. Especially with how different university is compared to our polytechnic days, time management and health management skills are essential things that we need to develop and utilise to ensure the maintenance of our wellbeing. Furthermore, his ideals when it came to learning are something that we can adopt in our lives as well. We will still remember fondly about how for Mr Wee, the knowledge, skills, and experience gained is more important than things like credentials or income. As he would say, “don’t worry that you don’t earn much, but worry that you don’t learn much”. As an avid advocate for lifelong learning, he values the countless learning opportunities that he can get, especially through voluntary involvement. Mr Wee’s positivity and passion had indeed rubbed off on us. It was awe-inspiring to hear about his life stories and life lessons. At the outset, the interview may have started somewhat rockily, with moments of awkwardness, meeting each other for the first time, but gradually, due to Mr Wee’s cheerfulness, our conversation just flows naturally, like between friends. This was a defining moment that we will not forget, ever.

The Chronicles of Me, Myself, and I

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sound too fantastic to be true, but it is already a reality in parts of the world today.

I always wondered what a robotic companion could do for me. Would it do internet-surfing for me if I suffer from speech and hearing issues? Need I mention the communication features that my digital buddy would have? I could have a video call with my children with its video and Wi-Fi capabilities – without me even picking up a smart phone. Maybe we all need such a companion!

I want to age gracefully, with as much independence as I can muster and as little help from my family and friends. "My robot companion" may sound like the title of a child's fairy tale, but if it could help me preserve a good quality of life – why not accept it as a welcome reality?

If I could write a letter addressed to myself 30 to 50 years from now, this is what I'll say.

To: Me in the future,

I hope this finds you well. I hope that as you age, you'll never lose your wonder of the world that is so vast. I hope that society in the future would be one that accepts you for who you are, regardless of your losses in status, position, or power. I hope that as your bones ache a little more to the point that you find it difficult to walk further distances than before; such that the environment around you will give you rest, or the means for transport without you having to depend on someone else.

I wish that your neighbourhood and the people around you would be forgiving of the mistakes that you'll make because of your minor lapses in memory. I hope that you will still have your independence, that no one will ever confine you to your home, because they think that you'll get 'lost' and disappear forever.

I hope that no one calls you "demented" or "troublesome" or "difficult", just because you've forgotten the person you once were. You are still the person with dreams and hopes just as you did many years ago.

Given the ever-increasing pace of technological advancement, is it possible that a robot helper would make life more comfortable for me in my senior years? It is foreseeable that robots with high levels of artificial intelligence could be designed to meet specific care needs, leading to improved quality of human life. It may

I hope that society would have harnessed technology to better care for the elderly by then, and with (hopefully) better knowledge of healthcare and empathy for those suffering from mental health issues, you are experiencing better care than your parents do today.

Ageing is inevitable but creativity does not age– it is there with us till we say goodbye. Throw away the old proverbial saying "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and embrace the new saying "NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN".

The canvas of art and creativity have no boundaries. The sky's the limit, anything that engages the creative mind the ability to make connections between things and imagination of new ways to connect is limitless. I hope that as I age, the world can continue to be my canvas of imagination and expression.

I hope that when I am gone, the stories I told, the crafts I made, the poetry I wrote, the paintings I painted would carry on its own legacy. I hope the future allows aging voices to be heard and unexpressed emotions expressed through art as we learn how to age artfully.

All the best to me! I can do this!

Best regards
Your truly
Me...