

# Undergrad, once homeless, took care of homeless Malaysians

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When undergraduate Roslina Toh read about Malaysians working in Singapore who were stranded after the Malaysian border was closed to stem the spread of Covid-19 in March last year, she decided to help at once.

She led a team of about 200 volunteers from various churches and, for more than a month, they spent almost every night looking for people who were sleeping rough and wanted a refuge.

The Home Away from Home initiative took those who wanted a temporary roof over their heads to Transit Point@Margaret Drive, a shelter for the homeless run by New Hope Community Services, and also offered food and sleeping bags to those who preferred to rough it out on the streets.

Ms Toh, who is studying social work at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said: "I was homeless before and people

helped me. So I want to give back and to do something for them."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned Ms Toh in his National Day Rally speech on Sunday night, and thanked her and others on the front line for serving during the pandemic.

"It was an honour," Ms Toh said, when asked how she felt to be singled out by PM Lee.

At 24, she has come a long way from her troubled childhood. Her parents divorced when she was a baby and her grandmother raised her and her three older sisters.

She never lived with her mother, with whom she had a distant relationship. Her father was in jail and she does not know the details of his incarceration.

Her estrangement from her mother came to a head when she was 14 years old. They had a big fight after her mother objected to her attending church services.

Her mother got one of Ms Toh's sisters to dump her belongings outside her grandmother's house.

"I left as I felt there was no point

["SHE'S A GEM" continued on B2](#)



Undergraduate Roslina Toh had a troubled childhood and once slept on the streets after her mother threw her out. Last year, she led a team of about 200 volunteers to offer food and refuge to Malaysian workers stranded in Singapore when the borders closed to stem the spread of Covid-19. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN



Ms Roslina Toh (seated) with pastor Ian Toh and his homemaker wife Lilis, who took her in when she was looking for a permanent home. The Tohs have three biological children and consider her part of their family. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

## She's a gem, say her 'spiritual parents'

**FROM B1**

in staying as my mum wanted me to leave," she said. "I felt I could survive on my own."

For a few weeks, she slept at void decks and at McDonald's outlets, borrowing money from friends to buy food. This went on until her father asked her to move in with him. Her sister had alerted him to Ms Toh's plight.

Ms Toh, who said her father was like a stranger to her, said: "I had only met him once or twice in my life before I went to live with him."

But she soon realised that it was unsafe and unsuitable for her to live with him and three other men in a one-room rental flat. She said her father drank and played mahjong late into the night.

She was sent to a home for at-risk teenage girls where she met pastor Ian Toh of 3:16 Church, who held chapel service at the home.

Over time, she got to know Mr Toh and his wife Lilis, both 42, and considers them her "spiritual parents" who guided her in her

Christian faith. "I felt they really took care of me like their own. I felt safe with them," she said.

As the home housed girls only under a certain age, she later moved to a hostel and started looking for a permanent place to live. She said her mother did not want to have anything to do with her.

And so, she asked the Tohs if she could live with them. They said "yes" immediately.

The Tohs have three biological children who are aged between nine and 16.

Mr Toh said: "One human need is the need for a family and we are happy to be a family for others."

Though the Tohs have not legally adopted her, Mr Toh said that his family considers Roslina part of the family. She calls him "daddy" and Mrs Toh, a homemaker, "mummy".

She has been living with them for the past eight years.

Ms Toh, whose father has died, is planning to change her surname from Chua to Toh through a deed poll. She goes by Roslina Toh now.

When the pandemic struck last

year and she read of Malaysians being stranded here after Malaysia barred its citizens from travelling abroad and foreigners from visiting, she empathised with them as she knew what it was like to be homeless from her experience.

Even after the street outreach efforts stopped, she continued befriending the homeless and volunteering at Transit Point@Margaret Drive until early this year.

She said: "Many of them were very appreciative of our help and I felt thankful seeing how much more comfortable they were at Transit Point."

She now volunteers to run programmes – such as how to conduct activities of daily living, and on English and drama – at the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore.

Mr Toh said Ms Toh has grown from being an angry child who was struggling in her studies to scoring a place in university and helping the homeless.

"She's a gem," he said.

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