

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize]

## **Wheels of Dreams**

(Original)

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“Haha! What are you doing? You look silly!”

My wheels got stuck in a pothole on the pedestrian street. I was determined to get out of the pothole without getting up from the wheelchair. However, hearing my neighbour smirk made me feel humiliated.

*‘Ahh, is this how my friends feel?’* As my hands gripped tighter shamefully on the rims of my wheels, I sighed and thought to myself.

I am on a personal project called The WheelPower and have spent 2 weeks functioning intermittently on a wheelchair. I strongly believe in the significance of the project because this is an opportunity to put myself in the perspective of our fellow wheelchair users, to understand the pain they experience, and to discover effective ways for redesigning our urban environment to be more disabled-inclusive.

As a developing country, the circumstances of our disabled citizens are often ignored. Unconsciously, once upon a time, I, too, had guiltily defined the entirety of the wheelchair users with their disability. For a long time, we have nonchalantly allowed the stigmatization of this contemporary issue to grow, to a point when the label of being “disabled” has become more disabling than one’s disability. Our biases have clouded our judgement, so much so that although visually functional, we have become blinded to the needs of our special friends.

The motivation of the WheelPower Project was my uncle. A 54-year-old difficult man who was obese with shuffling gait, Uncle Sunshine was labelled as a “Disabled Citizen” due to a suspected brain infection, which partially crippled his mental ability in the 1960s. His frustrating nature had villagers nicknamed him the “Madman of Town” that the mere notion of his presence terrified the them. Therefore, towards the end of 2017, we have decided to act as caretakers and brought him to live with us in Kuala Lumpur.

I dedicated the next 3 months communicating with Uncle Sunshine while helping him to be independent. Every morning during breakfast, he learned to analyse issues by reciting

the headlines on newspaper and discussed its content with me. During the day, he was responsible as a home manager to coordinate the details of house chores. He had gradually learned how to express his emotions appropriately. In the evening, we do simple exercise to correct his walking gait to prevent falls. At night, we would study English Alphabets, geometry and revise arithmetic to train his focus.

The result was shocking. With consistent compliments and a conducive environment, Uncle Sunshine has become well-behaved and empathetic. He is polite, and able to blend with his social circle, holds conversations with his friends and becomes well accepted. He now has improved on self-care and through discipline, he has also lost a significant amount of weight for health. Villagers have swamped to us, telling us about his new, fantastic reputation as a great companion. Uncle Sunshine also walks without falling, and most importantly, is happy and independent. Currently, he is preparing to return to workforce as a restaurant waiter.

This 3-month stint with Uncle Sunshine makes me re-evaluate our attitude towards the population with special needs. What if we could do more for our friends? What if we can re-design a city that allows the wheelchair users to head out of home, become independent, and participate in employment?

The flash of memory reminded me of my inspiration and calmed me down.

"Hey Mr Neighbour. I am on a wheelchair not because of any injury, but to understand how my friends on wheelchair feel when they leave home. I want to help improve their life by redesigning our city," I smiled and continued wiggling the wheels to get out of the pothole.

Suddenly I felt light. The wheelchair was lifted out of the pothole. My neighbour had come to help me through the haphazard, uneven street.

"What you're doing is... amazing," he quietly mumbled, "maybe we could do something together next time, on wheelchairs."

That was the exact moment I knew, that however small, I have made a change in my community. By instilling awareness in Mr neighbour, we take ownership of our community and the wellbeing of our friends with special needs. Let's give our friends the wheels of dreams.