

## SPH pays tribute to newspaper vendors in short video

AS THE CITY SLEEPS

**Our work is unconventional, but rewarding. Being out and about when the city is asleep, I get to enjoy the fresh morning air and quiet streets.**



**MR PACKIRISAMY SAMITHURAI**, a newspaper vendor who does his daily distribution rounds from 3am to 8am.

**Malavika Menon**

While most families in Singapore were still fast asleep yesterday morning, Mr Tony Chua was busy at the crack of dawn, delivering The Sunday Times to their doorsteps.

Come rain or shine, the 66-year-old distributes newspapers every day. He has been doing so for 43 years, and does not plan to retire any time soon.

He is one of five newspaper vendors featured in a short video put out by Singapore Press Holdings' circulation department to pay tribute to the company's vendors and thank them for their hard work.

Mr Chua wakes up at 3am before heading out to collect the day's newspapers and then distribute



Mr Sathik Batcha, 51, is one of the five newspaper vendors featured in the video by Singapore Press Holdings' circulation department.

them to homes in the West Coast area until 7am.

"Getting up early and distributing the paper is like an energetic morning exercise," he said.

"When I started out, it was tough to train myself to wake up so early,

but over time it has become part of my life."

Mr Chua, who is married with four children, was a factory worker before becoming a vendor. Although he has passed the retirement age, he hopes to continue

working as long as his health permits so that he can stay active.

Another vendor, Mr Packirisamy Samithurai, 47, also enjoys the morning work hours.

He has been a vendor for 15 years and does his daily distribution rounds in Bukit Batok from 3am to 8am. He likes the hours as they allow him to spend enough time with his children, aged 16 and nine.

"The job gives me the chance to spend time with my children when they get home from school. Not many parents have that opportunity," he said.

As Covid-19 cases spiked in Singapore last year, Mr Packirisamy was concerned about contracting the disease, but he pushed on with his work as he knew that the news was valuable to subscribers.

"Our work is unconventional, but rewarding. Being out and about when the city is asleep, I get

to enjoy the fresh morning air and quiet streets," he said.

Like many vendors, Mr Sathik Batcha, 51, is aware that the transformation of the media industry will affect subscriptions as well as his work.

He gets up at 2am before making deliveries in Bukit Panjang and Toa Payoh.

Mr Batcha, who is married with three children, said he has seen the job transform over the past three decades.

"So many small changes have crept into our work. We upgraded from landlines to mobile phones and now use WhatsApp to keep in touch with our subscribers," he said.

"Despite the changes, our job continues to be relevant. The younger generation get their news online, but for many older Singaporeans, reading the paper in the morning is still a beloved habit."

Readers can view the video at <https://str.sg/JH3o>

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## Users of motorised wheelchairs seek more transport help

**Devices don't fit into most cabs, private-hire cars; other vehicle options can be pricey**

**Clement Yong**

Getting around late at night when you are a wheelchair user can be a nightmare – something that Ms Mel Kaur knows all too well.

The 32-year-old stays out past midnight with friends only once a year – for Universal Studios Singapore's Halloween Horror Night – as heading home once trains and buses stop running is too much of a hassle.

Ms Kaur said that for her as a motorised wheelchair user, the easiest option is to book a Maxi cab in advance, but that means deciding days ahead the time that she would be going home, and forking out between \$50 and \$70.

For most people, missing a scheduled ride would mean just getting another taxi or private-hire car, but

that is not an option for Ms Kaur as few vehicles can accommodate her motorised wheelchair.

There have been times when she had to loiter outside until about 5.30am in order to take the first train home.

Ms Kaur, who works in marketing, told The Straits Times: "Most motorised wheelchairs are not foldable, which means we are not able to use a (regular) car as a mode of transport."

"This means we have to carefully plan each outing, ensuring we avoid peak hours and making sure we do not miss the last bus or train."

She added: "Imagine if I am late for a meeting, or if it's raining, or if I have to go somewhere that is quite a distance from the nearest MRT station or bus stop. Being able to take a taxi (or private-hire car) should not be a privilege, but a right."

All taxis can fit foldable wheelchairs in their boot, but private-hire

cars, many of which are privately owned, are more varied.

Motorised wheelchairs pose a problem as they cannot fit into nearly all cabs, including London Cabs. ComfortDelGro's Maxicabs are an exception, but they are costly and often must be booked a few days before the trip.

Vehicles under GrabAssist, a service by private-hire giant Grab that allows the user to fold a wheelchair or personal mobility aid for storage in the vehicle before getting in, likewise neglect motorised wheelchair users.

The last option is private-charter vehicles, but firms which operate them often have only a few vehicles and charge up to \$100 a trip, and the vehicle must be booked weeks in advance.

When Ms Kaur tried to charter rides to and from her university about six times a month, she was told it would cost her about \$1,200.

Grab recently introduced GrabAssist Plus, which does not require wheelchair users to dismount before getting in. But there are only 10 vehicles available for the trial, and



Grab is trialling GrabAssist Plus, which does not require wheelchair users to dismount before getting into the vehicle. But there are only 10 vehicles available for the trial and trips are limited to between a passenger's home and selected healthcare institutions. PHOTO: GRAB SINGAPORE

trips are limited to between a passenger's home and selected healthcare institutions.

The starting fare of \$32 is nearly five times that of GrabAssist's \$7, and Ms Kaur noted that the limited destinations do not help wheelchair users in their regular lives outside of medical consultations.

"Our lives are not just about going to hospitals or school and work. We have a life beyond that. I strongly feel that more 'fun' help should be provided to ensure one lives a fulfilling life, giving us opportunities to explore leisure like anyone else."

A quadruple amputee who wanted to be known only as Carole Ann said she takes taxis and private-hire cars because she has not got used to taking public transport.

Ms Carole, who is 44 and unemployed, does not use her motorised wheelchair outside because of the

inconvenience of getting into taxis or private-hire cars.

She has to dismount and get back on her wheelchair multiple times for each trip. To do this, she uses a transfer board to heave herself into the car, a process that takes five minutes and requires immense emotional preparation.

Ms Carole prefers to use ComfortDelGro taxis as there are relatively few GrabAssist cars. When she uses GrabAssist, she often finds herself waiting indefinitely for a ride.

Grab would not say how many of these vehicles it has, although it said the service has completed more than 50,000 trips since it was launched in 2018.

Ms Carole said: "Grab cars are not standard, so sometimes there isn't enough boot space for my foldable wheelchair."

"In general, drivers (whether of

taxis or private-hire cars) sometimes are also not very conscious of my needs. Some do not get out of the vehicle to help and do not understand why I have to use only the front seat. The back door is an obstacle for me.

"Every time I take a cab, it is tiring and is a gamble."

The Land Transport Authority said all private-hire car operators must provide the option of vehicles with sufficient boot space for foldable wheelchairs, under regulations implemented last October.

But it added: "A balance has to be maintained in the provision of such services to keep them affordable and at the same time financially sustainable for the service provider."

"Commuters who need help with transport costs can apply for the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Taxi Subsidy Scheme, which can be used for both taxi and private-hire car rides."

The scheme, administered by SG Enable, subsidises up to 80 per cent of fares but applies only to trips to school, work and training courses, or if the person is certified by a doctor to be able to travel only by taxi.

In recent years, the public transport system has become more inclusive. All bus routes are now wheelchair-friendly, with 99 per cent of public buses equipped with ramps or an automated wheelchair-lifting mechanism.

All bus interchanges, integrated transport hubs and MRT stations also have barrier-free access routes.

For wheelchair users, being able to get into a car without dismounting – at a reasonable price – is the next step in Singapore's bid for inclusivity.

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Dr Tay Jun Yang, a senior resident at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, his wife, Dr Elaine Low, a general practitioner at Tampines West Medical Clinic, and their 15-month-old daughter Eliana. The couple have taken extra precautions since Covid-19 struck to keep Eliana safe, including separating their laundry from hers and taking a shower immediately after reaching home. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



## Making adjustments to meet the demands of front-line work

**FROM B1**

messages reminding each other to stay safe.

Mr Afiq said: "Sometimes, she will cook dinner for me. That alone will be my strength to carry on as I look forward to spending time with her when I'm home."

**THOUGHT OF LIVING APART**

When the pandemic hit Singapore, Dr Tay Jun Yang and his wife, Dr Elaine Low, both 32, worried about the health of their then three-month-old daughter.

Dr Tay, a senior resident at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, works in the Covid-19 outbreak wards.

Outside of those wards, he also sees patients with infectious diseases in hospital inpatient wards and clinics, and patients referred for infectious disease consultation.

His wife, a general practitioner at Tampines West Medical Clinic, sees patients for both acute and chronic ailments, as well as acute respiratory illnesses.

Amid the pandemic, the married couple of four years considered living apart to minimise the risk to

their now 15-month-old daughter, Eliana.

They eventually decided against that as it would be tough on the family. Instead, they took extra precautions such as separating their laundry from their daughter's and taking a shower immediately after reaching home.

The demands of working on the front line have taken a toll on the sleep-deprived couple, who work 10- to 12-hour shifts daily.

Dr Tay said: "The greatest challenge is not having enough couple time and having to juggle work, studying for my final specialist

exam and caring for a young daughter."

He said they used to go to the cinema a lot but no longer do so. The last movie they watched together was 2019's Avengers: Endgame.

Dr Tay also covers night and weekend shifts, and was once away from his family for two days.

And, dressed in personal protective equipment, it is difficult to text or call his wife, who would be caring for their daughter at home.

Dr Low said: "Being in the healthcare sector has allowed us to be more understanding about

the demands of each other's work. "Sometimes, we know what each other is feeling or thinking without even saying it out loud."

**BABY PLANS ON HOLD**

For years, Ms Siti Adhawayah Mohamed Ali, 40, and her husband, Mr Muhammad Nazarul Jamil, 41, had been trying to have children.

But the married couple of eight years have decided not to have children for now.

Ms Siti, a manager in the special outpatient clinic ambulatory operations department at Raffles Hospital, was assigned to set up and manage the operations of a vaccine centre at Tanjong Pagar Community Club, where she works shifts of up to 15 hours.

Mr Nazarul, 41, a senior executive in the same department of the hospital, monitors and reports cases coming from the hospital's emergency department.

Ms Siti said: "We want a family, but at this stage, I'm very much involved in my work and ensuring

that things run smoothly."

Before her posting to the vaccine centre, when the couple worked separate shifts in July last year at a community care facility at Changi Exhibition Centre caring for migrant workers, they would occasionally bump into each other.

But working long hours and on weekends meant that their favourite activity of cycling together from Pasir Ris to Marina Barrage had to be shelved.

Mr Nazarul said: "Ever since Siti was deployed for this on-site vaccination project, we've hardly had time to cycle together."

Still, he drives from their Pasir Ris home to Tanjong Pagar each day to fetch her from work at 10pm before they have a late dinner together.

She said: "I'm very lucky he's always there to listen to my troubles. Ever since we've been working apart, we have learnt to better value the time we have together because of how limited it is."

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