

# Volunteers step forward to help

V.K. SANTOSH KUMAR

Ms Mathilda D'Silva is unable to do any work from home because her social enterprise Ocean Purpose Project has ceased operations owing to the enhanced Covid-19 circuit-breaker measures.

"I cannot indulge in my pet obsessions such as ocean conservation and beach clean-ups," said the organisation's founder and CEO. "I'm also going crazy watching TV at home."

"I like to do constructive things all the time and so I have started packing food for migrant workers who are stuck in dormitories."

Every day she spends up to six hours packing food for the workers, some of whom are unable to leave their rooms following the Government's directive that all work permit and S Pass holders in the construction sector would have to stay in their living quarters until May 4.

The number of coronavirus cases among foreign workers staying in dormitories is rising.

"It's tiring work as six of us (volunteers) are packing 1,600 food packets at a time," said Ms D'Silva. "It has to be done properly because nothing can spill over. But I'm enjoying it because I'm serving the community and I believe this is the least I can do for people who are facing hard times during this pandemic."

The talented singer, a former Singapore Idol finalist, decided to join the food delivery project initiated by the Indian caterer Mayura, whose staff prepare the food. She and a team of volunteers pack it twice a day and the packets are delivered to dormitories in Tuas in time for lunch and dinner by Mr Balakrishnan Annadurai, the owner of Pandora Tomorrow Weddings, and five of his friends.

"The workers get a nice meal of spinach dal, rice and fish or chicken curry," said Ms D'Silva. "It is sometimes the highlight of their day."

"I feel we are doing something purposeful. Our businesses are not running, but that doesn't mean we cannot help others using our resources. I feel happy when I realise that the workers are not anxious and go to sleep with their stomachs full."

Ms Vasanthi Ravi is another volunteer who - along with a group of friends - has been regularly delivering



Residents in S11 Dormitory @ Punggol on Tuesday.

PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

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- Ms Mathilda D'Silva

food packets to workers in dormitories in Mandai and Jurong since last Friday.

"We have been doing this for the past six years, pitching in with our own funds and delivering groceries and essential items to workers' dormitories every three months," she said.

"Earlier, we used to provide items such as sugar, oil and dal which helped them cook their own food. Now that individual cooking is banned, we are delivering snacks, soaps and detergents through a vendor."

Mrs Ravi interacted closely with foreign workers during a job stint at Jurong Island in 1997. "The living conditions are sometimes tough for them," she said. "The Government has done a lot for them and now the dormitories are well equipped and comfortable. But I still feel I should help them in any small way I can."

The decision to place foreign construction workers on stay-home notices took several of them by surprise when it was announced last Saturday. Many living in shophouses and shared private accommodations didn't know from where they would get their next meal as their employers did not have time to make such arrangements.

That is when Ms Deshi Gill and her team of volunteers from Humanitarian

Organisation for Migration Economics stepped in.

"Some of the workers staying in shophouses in Geylang and near Mustafa Centre had no avenues to get food as their employers only provided accommodation," she said. "It was difficult for them as they don't have the resources to get food and medicines on their own."

"We identified 100 such workers and have been providing meals to them since last Sunday. A lot of people are giving us groceries and we are getting the meals cooked by kind-hearted souls. It would have been terrible if the workers were left to fend for themselves."

Many Indians in Singapore are doing their bit to help the migrant workers overcome the pandemic situation. The Government has extended the circuit-breaker measures until June 1 and the workers will not be able to move around freely till then.

Mr Ankur Bhatnagar, who runs the restaurant Haldi at Boat Quay, is utilising his kitchen and cooks to prepare meals for the workers at a minimum rate, while lawyer Sudheshan Hariram regularly posts on Facebook - urging people to donate and listing the different caregivers.

Three members of Seva Si a charitable organisation, h stitching 300 masks at their h "About 150 have already be eered to dormitories in Pungg Mr Rajan Vadakkepat, its vic dent.

Ms Ranjani Rangan, a dire consulting firm CPA Partners ventured to teach the worker thing about e-remittances" also help them understand h for phone cards, sending mor ordering grocery online," she

She is also spearheading a tive by Singapore Indian Society's alumni to provide a live dance and music perform

"This has been on from A and will continue till May 5," Rangan, who is SIFAS' assist surer. "We have informed m dormitory operators about th and hope it will provide peac calm to the workers."

The High Commission of I has been backing MOM's provide relief to the workers

"I (along with Singapore r and MPs) have spoken to the workers at different dormito India's High Commissioner to pore Jawed Ashraf.

"I have told them to rema and assured them that the Si Government will take ca salaries and daily needs. Commission also has a 24-ho cated helpline through which ers can reach us."

Staff at the High Commiss been encouraging Indians in to help the workers through government channels. They relayed motivational mess: personalities such as film jiniKanth, cricketer Sachin Te and musician Shankar Mahac the workers.

"We are well looked after dormitory (PPT Lodge 1A at gol)," said construction work Ramesh, who is from Pudukc Tamil Nadu. "I understand th of the food we get is Indian groups and individual much appreciated."

"I am not worried that we out of food or personal items fear is the virus. I don't know long it will last."

— santosh@

## Taking care of Indian students and visitors too

Business is slow for restaurateur Mohamed Eliyas, who runs Aayisha Briyani House at Raffles Place.

So, he is employing his staff to cook food for 43 students and visitors from India who are stranded in Singapore without adequate funds or means to return home.

Mr Eliyas himself delivers the food packets twice a

"I believe in serving people too. These people need help and I believe it is my duty to support them in their hour of need."

He charges \$3 for a meal which includes delivery. The funding is provided by members of the Senggang Cricket Group and Kala Singapore, an arts group.

"We depend on voluntary donations," said

