

ANURTURING HOME

A chance to blossom

From living at void decks and illiteracy to better care and education, this 12-year-old's life has been transformed at Sunbeam Place

SINGAPORE – At the age of seven, May (not her real name) had the body weight of a two-year-old. When she was admitted to hospital for an upper respiratory tract infection, staff were alarmed over how pale, weak and malnourished she looked.

The hospital alerted the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport (MCYS, now known as the Ministry of Social and Family Development), which referred her case to Sunbeam Place. The approved home takes in children aged two to 18 who suffer abuse or neglect, or who need the care and protection that their parents are not able to provide.

May was diagnosed with a medical condition called failure to thrive. She had not been to school, and had not received any immunisations since birth. She also had a residual varus deformity on her right elbow which resulted from a fracture four years earlier.

May had fallen at the playground while playing with friends. She was brought to the doctor for treatment initially, but once the pain had subsided, her mother thought that the follow-up check-ups would not be necessary. Fortunately, the condition has not hampered her movement in any way and the slight jutting of bone at her arm is not obvious.

May was admitted to Sunbeam Place in January 2009, where her two brothers and one half-brother (born to the same mother) were already living.

A SAFE AND STABLE HOME

According to the family's case worker at Sunbeam Place, Ms Delphanie Phua, the three brothers, now aged 13, 14 and 16, were admitted when they were five, three and four years old respectively. Their parents voluntarily sent them there because the family was struggling financially and did not have stable accommodation, living at void

decks and budget hotels instead.

Their mother is a housewife while the father used to be a karung guni man until he had saved enough to open a small repair shop. He is also suffering from poor health and currently needs heart surgery.

When May was born, her mother did not initially admit her to Sunbeam Place because she wanted her as a companion. These days, she visits her children once a week, bringing them out for a meal and to chat.

Despite everything, Ms Phua said that the children remain very understanding of their parents' financial circumstances and the reasons they are living at Sunbeam Place. "They're very respectful, cooperative children. They're very close to their mother. She may not always understand them, but she provides basic nurturing needs."

May's brothers occasionally stay with their parents during home leave, but May is only allowed to do so during Chinese New Year. May's father has a 19-year-old daughter with another family who had alleged that she was molested growing up, and the matter is still under investigation. Once May's carers at Sunbeam Place found out, they stopped her from going home as they were concerned about her safety.

BLOSSOMING IN A CARING ENVIRONMENT

When May first moved into Sunbeam Place five years ago, she cried a lot. Her mother's visits helped her to settle down. That she was not completely unfamiliar with the home, having visited her brothers on previous occasions, also provided some consolation.

In the beginning, due to a lack of exposure to the English language and formal education, she had difficulties naming colours and shapes, and could not read or understand words presented to her. She was immediately enrolled in kindergarten and proved to be an enthusiastic student. She was also put into several programmes for intensive help with reading and comprehension, as



Twelve-year-old May (not her real name) enjoys reading; English is her favourite subject. PHOTO: KOH MUJ FONG

well as development. This included a programme at Sunbeam Place which was customised to teach her basic phonetics, as well as a therapy programme conducted by the then-MCYS, that focused on not just literacy skills but also social and interpersonal learning to prepare her for Primary 1.

May is now in Primary 5, and counts reading and "writing in her diary with friends" as some of the things she enjoys doing. She likes going to school, and English is her favourite subject. While shy and reticent with strangers, Ms Phua described her as friendly and outgoing with people she is familiar with.

Sunbeam Place continues to enrol her in programmes that "suit her needs and build up her strengths", said Ms Phua. This includes play therapy with a volunteer at the home, character-building classes organised by the Singapore Children's Society and art classes with The Little Arts Academy, a not-for-profit arts education enterprise. With the latter, she had been attending over the last year a foundation class that exposed the children to various arts genres like music, drama and dance. In the second year, students get to pick what they want to specialise in. May chose keyboard lessons.

Through her time at Sunbeam Place, May has benefitted from the nurturing environment. "She has become more expressive," said Ms Phua. "She's doing better in school. She's also grown more assertive. If anyone bullies her, she will scold them. She's better able to protect herself now. In the past, she'd just cry." **PRODUCED BY THE TODAY SPECIAL PROJECTS TEAM**

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