

NEW BEGINNINGS

The wind beneath his wings

For this young man, Sunbeam Place provided more than a ray of hope

Timothy did not know what was coming. Social workers from Sunbeam Place appeared at his door one day in 2007, offering him a life that was different from the grinding one he knew. Sunbeam Place is a residential home and gazetted place of safety for children who have been abused and neglected and are in need of protection, or whose parents are unable to provide proper care.

HIDING FROM SCHOOL

Then 12 years old and in Primary 6, Timothy was fending for himself in a house that was often empty. His mother was ill and his father had been drifting in and out of his life. The only person Timothy saw regularly at home was his sister, who was then in Secondary 2.

Timothy was also not going to school. The boy attended one week of lessons in January 2007, but stopped showing up for classes. School was “not an option” even though he was due to take the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) that year. There was no money for bus fare. Neither was there any for recess. Staying at home meant that he did not have to go hungry. There were instant noodles in the kitchen he could cook.

A NEW HOME

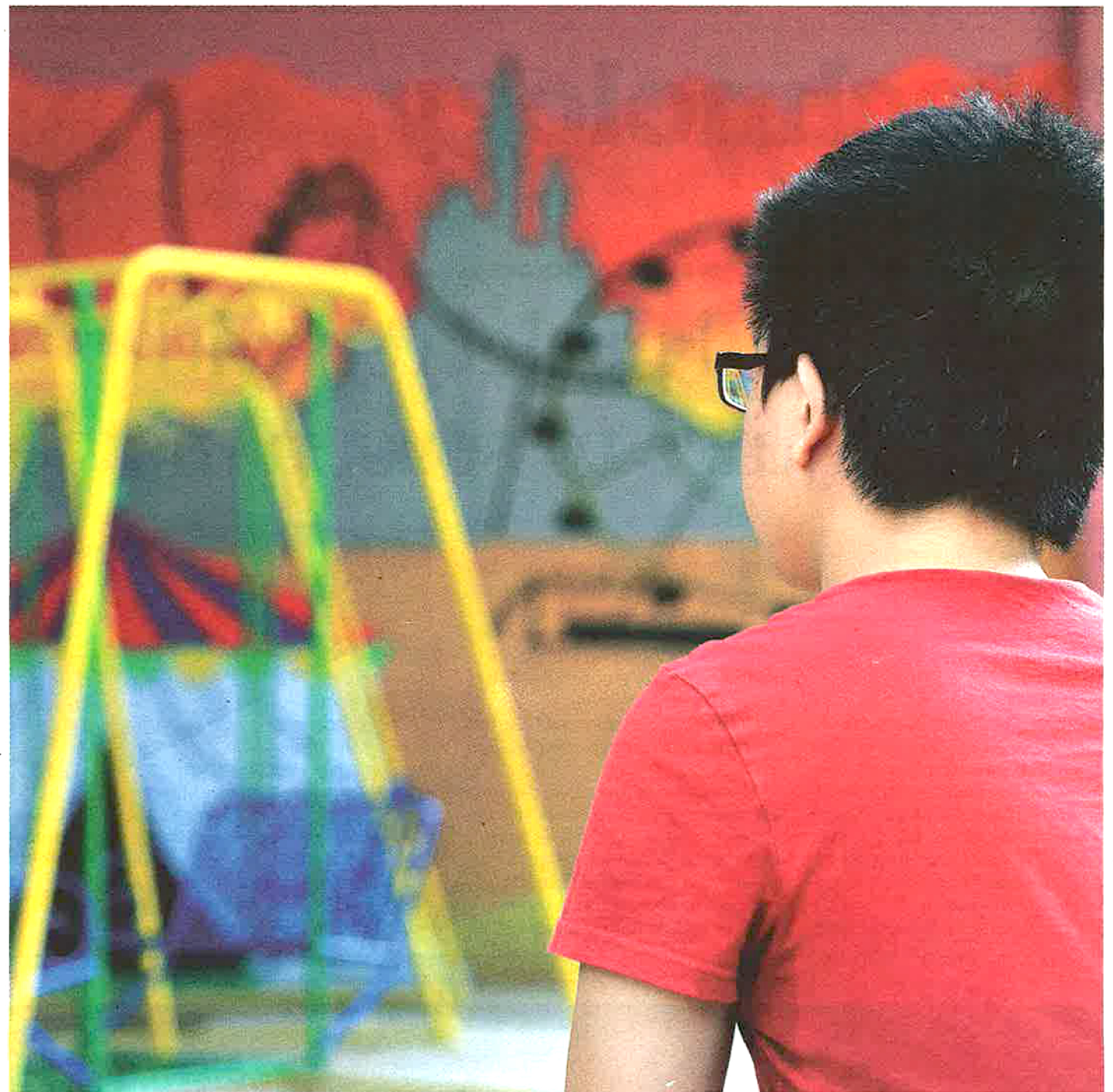
When the social workers arrived, cooping himself up at home was no longer the only option for Timothy. He saw the trust his mother had in these strangers and when he was told by her to leave with them, he agreed.

“If you have been taking care of yourself and making decisions for yourself, you no longer know what to be afraid of,” said Timothy, reflecting on the fearlessness he displayed.

“In my situation, a new environment didn’t feel scary. It felt like a novelty, not a disaster.”

Sunbeam Place turned out to be more than a foster home for Timothy. For the past few years, it has been a place of support and opportunities.

The boy, who once hid from school in his empty home, found understanding.



At Sunbeam Place, Timothy found support and opportunities. PHOTO: KOH MUI FONG

“The social workers still provided me with a place to stay even though I wasn’t a student. I’m really thankful because, in the end, I discovered what I wanted to do.”

Timothy
SUNBEAM PLACE RESIDENT

At Sunbeam Place, Timothy only had his homework to worry about. He did not have to go hungry during recess. Staff members provided nurture, a comforting presence, and transport to and from school. More positive changes ensued: Timothy passed the PSLE in 2007, and the O-Level examinations four years later.

SPEAKING UP

Timothy was once silent about the issues he faced in his empty home. At Sunbeam Place, he found room for his feelings to be heard. In 2012, the teenager confided in the social workers that he could not find fulfilment in the media design diploma programme he was enrolled in. He wanted to leave the course.

The doubts and fears he had about the “setback” melted when he was told: “As long as it’s really what you want to do, it’s okay. No one knows what he wants to do at the age of 16.”

Timothy, who worked part-time after

he left the media design course, enrolled in an information technology diploma programme offered by a polytechnic in 2013. The logic behind IT and the possibilities it offered appealed to him.

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FAMILY IS PRIORITY

Timothy put his passion for the subject to good use in a business analytics visualisation course project he worked on recently. He analysed data on households in Singapore and flagged up the lack of family bonding as an area of concern.

“I hope to shed some light on the problem because when a family is not as tight-knit as it should be, there will be problems, such as teen suicides,” he said.

Timothy’s family remains a priority for him. He is in touch with his sister, who is now a journalist, and his mother.

“The only time when a family is not a family is when you choose to break off ties,” he said. “I’m always going to be in touch with my family, even with my father.”

TAKING FLIGHT

Timothy’s other family at Sunbeam

* LEND A HELPING HAND

The OCBC-TODAY Children’s Fund was set up to help children from distressed families who have suffered the effects of neglect or even abuse. Donations will be capped at S\$1.5 million each year — S\$1 million from public contributions and S\$500,000 from OCBC’s commitment to give S\$1 for every S\$2 raised. This helps ensure that other charities, especially smaller outfits, also have the chance to benefit from the generosity of donors.

Visit www.ocbctodayfund.sg or call the SCS fundraising department at 6273 2010.

Place is also close to his heart. As graduation from polytechnic approaches and enlistment for National Service beckons, so does the end of his long stay at Sunbeam Place.

He is planning for a life outside the centre with help from the social workers. Timothy is happy to become his own man, like a young butterfly eager to take flight.

“Because I’m in this chrysalis, I’m protected. If it wasn’t for this chrysalis, I might not have survived. But would I have to make it out myself? Yes, and I look forward to it.” **PRODUCED BY THE TODAY SPECIAL PROJECTS TEAM**

*TIMOTHY’S NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT HIS IDENTITY.