

Mr Ong Hoek has led the Silver Generation Office, an arm's length agency, since 2015. Through the office, he has worked on different specialisations, and led Active@ before joining the Agency for Integrated Care. In his current role, he advocates technology and wants to build a culture of competence for Singaporeans. ST PHOTO BY LIM JIAN



Wong Kim Jiah Meets...

'Ageing is a blessing... it's not a liability, it spells possibility'

The chief of Singapore's Silver Generation Office says the challenge is to give seniors purpose, like serving and helping others.



Wong Kim Jiah
 Features Editor

Stereotypes about military men abound, and they are often not very flattering. Rapid, bureaucratic, unimaginative, boring and less-than-ideal are just some words that come to mind. These adjectives, however, do not apply to Mr Ong Hoek Lim, who spent almost three decades in the army. The former colonel is anything but stiff; he is self-deprecating, quick to laugh and has a knack for making people — especially seniors — feel comfortable. It probably explains why he is chief of the Silver Generation Office (SGO), the outreach arm of the Agency for Integrated Care. It is responsible for engaging seniors on government policies, active ageing programmes, subsidising care and support services.

The 54-year-old has the shape and look of a young man. In May, he completed his PhD in gerontology — the multidisciplinary study of ageing and older adults — at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), following his master's degree in gerontology from the same university in 2018. The documents, which look like a student's, list his research interests to include: "The determinants of ways to help sustain adults to exercise, to help them to live independently and to the extent of a living of dignity he has obtained over the years. He has a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from NUS, a master's in transportation systems from SUSS, as well as a master's in training and development from Australian Griffith University.

Mr Ong has also attended various courses in leadership and logistics at the King Kong three Command and Staff College and SAF Military Institute, as well as the Army Logistics University in Virginia, US.

Interestingly, he paid for most of the second-year-related courses out of his own pocket. "I did them because I didn't want to be a freerider in the end, knowing only some staff. Also, I like to study," he says. His background in engineering and his personality fit in the school of four children, and his parents asked a living relative at the former Elizabeth Hospital. "They worked every day except for the first day of Chinese New Year," he recalls. Together with his paternal grandfather and two uncles, the family lived in a rental flat in Jalan Alor. Mr Ong slept on a mattress in the living room. To save space, they would fill the toilet with cement and position a toilet paper roll on top. "To become a doctor, he had to become a doctor because you could not see the space below for sleeping," he says with a chuckle. He advised his grandfather, who he looked after for his old age, to do things while his parents worked. The two became closer when he fell ill. "I was only 10 or 11 then, but because the adults were working, and I was the eldest grandson, I became her walking stick. I was always the one who took her to hospital," he recalls.

"I didn't know it then, but it was caregiving. I went to manage the hospital system, which he drove to see, how to pay how to get medication from the pharmacy." The loss for his grandfather led him to develop empathy and a deep affinity for the elderly, and was instrumental in making him study gerontology while he was in the army.

DEVELOPING EMPATHY

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Mr Ong recalls when he was his grandfather's walking stick to help him to the toilet and a deep affection for the elderly.

still in the army. More about that later. After she died when he was 18, the former student of North Hill School and Temple Technical School fell into bad company. He played football and got into fights. He recalls a month when several gang members kept looking at him even after he was down on the ground. "I was thinking to myself, 'One day it will be my turn. I also felt that I continued to hang out with those people, my late grandmother would have been so disappointed,'" he says.

After completing his diploma at Anglo-Chinese Junior College, he applied for the Singapore Armed Forces' Academic Training School, which paid for two months of out-of-pocket courses at NUS in 1991 and gave him a monthly salary. A university education would not have been possible otherwise, as his father was diagnosed with breast cancer then. "It was always mother and child's best friend," he says, adding that his father died three months after the diagnosis. His mother took over the household and the way he lived. "Before that, she was just helping him at the stall. She knew nothing about finance then, but she learnt day by day and just continued the business."

During his undergraduate days, he would help out at the stall on weekends, clearing vegetables that they applied to six char stalls. "If you don't store them properly, the veggies would turn black. My strongest memory of my father is of me applying cement to the holes on his hands because he touched a lot of things," he says.

The mother finally stopped working when Elizabeth Hospital was demolished to make way for redevelopment in the 1990s. Mr Ong started out as an infantry officer in the army before joining the navy and then the air force, where he stayed for 10 years. The highlight was leading the first team for the Pegasus, a lightweight helicopter transportable between ports developed by the Singapore Armed Forces, Defence Science and Technology Agency and ST Engineering in the mid-1990s.

He returned to military logistics in 2005 as it was ending rapidly at that time, transitioning processes such as troop movement and logistics. He continued to embrace the capability and sustainability of military operations. Over the next decade, he made



Mr Ong (right) and Major Barry in 2019 when he was commander of the Public Support Command. PHOTO BY LIM JIAN



Mr Ong (left) at the graduation parade of recruits from the King's College School in 2019, when he was commander of the Army Logistics Training Institute. PHOTO BY LIM JIAN

his mark in the field. Among other things, he was involved in large-scale international events such as the International Ministry Parade/World Bank meetings held in Singapore in 2005. He was also the director of logistics and transport for the inaugural Singapore Youth Olympic Games in 2010, which drew 1,600 athletes and 40,000 participants as well as 4,000 staff members.

He also played a key role in setting up the army's Supply Unit, controlling inventory management for military equipment and supplies to boost efficiency and operational readiness. In 2016, he became commander of the Army Logistics Training Institute, which he revamped with modern adult learning techniques, a refreshed curriculum and the latest training technology.

Notably, he forged partnerships with the Institute of Professional Education, polytechnics and SUSS to offer courses such as logistics,

building a network to equip seniors with future-ready skills. His dedication and innovative efforts earned him the Public Sector Transformation Award in 2019.

"Once, he drove to a construction site and recognized the security guard as his former troop or warrant officer, who had moved home and was wearing his old military cap and beret. Much of it is random, as the right moment just befalls from a young age."

He strongly believes in the continuity theory, which states that older adults maintain the same behaviours and personalities as they did in the past. "You're positive when you're young, you'll stay positive when you're old. The one lesson he will carry with him through his years? "With your knapsack as you grow old. People are going to give you too many hands, you may not have time to state them when you're older."

could contribute. He served the nation and defended the country, so maybe I should help our ageing population. The training was perfect, as SUSS had just started a centre in gerontology. As part of his coursework, he volunteered at an active ageing centre, conducting exercises for seniors and coordinating trips to places like the Botanic Gardens. "My logistic capabilities came in handy because we had to cater to so many different needs," says Mr Ong, who bagged the Alvin Lim Memorial Fund Gold Award for graduating top of his cohort. In 2018, he left the army and took on the role of deputy and later chief of Active@, a free sports membership programme for Singaporeans and permanent residents.

He co-created and launched the Active Ageing Initiative, focusing on collaboration and technology to promote ways for people to stay physically healthy and socially engaged as they grow older. The programme consists of exercises, he proposed free entry to swimming pools and gyms for elderly Singaporeans, and also proposed incentive schemes, including stipends, to boost senior volunteerism. Facing the Covid-19 pandemic, he led "proactive ageing" to convert Active@ sports centres into dormitories to provide accommodation and community support for migrant workers. Although it took some deliberation, he was glad he agreed when he was approached to head the SGO in January 2023. "Seniors and ageing is a subject close to my heart. Maybe it was also the right time," Mr Ong says. Indeed, Singapore's population is ageing rapidly. One in four citizens will be aged 65 and above by 2026. To engage seniors and improve their quality of life in their golden years, the Ministry of Health is allocating \$500 million over five years for active ageing centres to expand their outreach and increase the scope and quality of programmes. Health Minister Ong Ye Keng recently announced that \$70 million will be allocated to more than 250 active ageing centres in the next fiscal year, up from the \$60 million disbursed to 157 centres in FY2023.

Mr Ong finds deep meaning in his work at the agency, which he regards as a chance to serve the nation. In social and psychological wellbeing, meaningful interventions when necessary. "It's a privilege because we're the only organisation allowed into senior homes to hear their stories. Visiting them leaves a night makes me 100 years old," he quips, noting that the SGO currently has 100 staff, about 200,000 seniors each year. "The thing about ageing is being your roles," he explains. "When you're young, you have work roles. When your life goes up, you have an empty nest. Then you start losing friends, your parents, and you feel yourself alone," says the father of 10-year-old twins.

The challenge is to give seniors purpose, like serving and helping others. "It's about what matters to you, not what's the matter with you," Mr Ong says. One of his goals is to promote volunteerism across different segments of the population, from seniors to youth and racial-ethnic groups. "The target is to increase the number of Silver Guardians from 200 now to 2,400 by 2028," he says, referring to the non-fee volunteer programme launched in April 2024 to help seniors age actively.

Ageing is a blessing, says Mr Ong, who sits on the advisory boards of Singapore Polytechnic, Republic Polytechnic and RPSG. "The retirement gift to you is a healthy body, it's a possibility. Much of it is random, as the right moment just befalls from a young age."

He strongly believes in the continuity theory, which states that older adults maintain the same behaviours and personalities as they did in the past. "You're positive when you're young, you'll stay positive when you're old. The one lesson he will carry with him through his years? "With your knapsack as you grow old. People are going to give you too many hands, you may not have time to state them when you're older."

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