

Harvard grad opts to work in charity

22-year-old enjoys job at centre that champions mental resilience

Priscilla Goy

At 22, Ms Chew Chia Shao Wei is the youngest and newest employee at charity Brahm Centre.

"But don't look down on her just because she is young or small-built. She is from Harvard," her colleagues tell elderly residents when accompanying her on visits to their homes.

Ms Chew Chia told The Straits Times: "Then the clients would be, like, 'Huh? Why don't you get a better job?' I think they don't realise that it is a great job; that it is very rewarding and fulfilling."

She works at the five-year-old charity, which champions mental resilience, as an assistant care coordinator. She visits the homes of elderly residents who have, or are at risk of having, mental illnesses, assesses their needs and coordinates the help given. She also conducts research on hoarding.

She joined the centre last month, and is one of the most qualified among its 17 full-time staff.

Ms Chew Chia graduated *magna cum laude* with a liberal arts degree, with a single major in history and literature and a minor in social anthropology.

At Harvard, the top 5 per cent of the graduating class are awarded *summa cum laude*, while the *magna cum laude* goes to the next 15 per cent. She had a near-perfect grade point average of 3.96 out of 4.

She was a high achiever in her younger days too.

When she was 15, she won an international essay competition organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society – in a category for students aged 16 to 18.

The winning essay was published four years later as an illustrated book, *The Rock And The Bird*, which tells the story of a friendship between the titular characters. The book was named Best Young Adults' Title in the Singapore Book Awards last year.

Ms Chew Chia, an alumna of Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Junior College, also had As for all her subjects in her A levels, except for a C grade in economics.

People with such grades in junior college and university tend to opt for better-paying jobs, but her volunteering experiences kindled her interest in joining the charity sector.



HELPING THE LESS FORTUNATE

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MS CHEW CHIA SHAO WEI

In particular, a three-week service learning trip to Cape Town, South Africa, when she was in Secondary 3 was "transformative" for her. She went to an area with a high incidence of HIV infection, and helped mainly children and infants who were abused or neglected.

"After returning to school from the trip, I often asked myself, 'Why am I here? Why am I back in school?' But then I would think of the needy people I met in Cape Town and how much they would love to be in my place, to be going to school – and such a good school too," she said.

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PHOTO: DON WONG FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

She said: "In my last semester at Harvard, as I was trying to decide what to do with my future, I realised that the volunteer work I did was the highlight of each week.

"No matter how difficult the work could be, I noticed that on the days that I had to go for my volunteering shift, I would literally jump out of bed because I was just too excited. So I decided that after graduating, I would do what I love."

She added: "I have learnt how to listen, how to be present with someone, and gained knowledge about the community and what things are like on the ground... Those whom we call our care recipients have at least as much or even more to give and teach me."

Her mother had also worked at Brahm Centre and was its head of counselling and psychotherapy. Ms Chew Chia joined the centre a few months after her mother retired.

Her father is a semi-retired adviser in philanthropy in a local university. She has an older sister and a younger brother.

She said: "After hearing my mother's stories about her work, I knew that Brahm Centre would be a place where I could learn more about serving the community.

"My mum couldn't give details about the cases due to sensitivity issues, but she talked about the skills she used to manage the cases and the breakthroughs made."

Ms Chew Chia also felt that working in a smaller charity would allow her to take on more responsibilities and expose her to different types of cases in the healthcare sector.

When asked what her family and friends thought of her career choice, she said most were supportive, but noted that some friends were sceptical or had financial situations that would make it hard for them to not opt for better-paying jobs.

Brahm Centre executive director Angie Chew said of Ms Chew Chia: "She has natural kindness that people just take to, and this is an asset when you are in the caring profession. It is wonderful that a young person like her wants to care for the elderly instead of chasing material wealth."

Ms Chew Chia said: "Some young people hold back from joining this sector for different reasons, such as financial or family pressures.

"But for those who have the option but never explored it or just dismissed it, I would encourage them to challenge themselves to make a difference, because the reward is immeasurable."

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Ms Chew Chia went on to volunteer at various organisations, including eldercare charity Lions Befrienders and youth charity Heartware Network.

During her university days, she volunteered two to three times a week at Health Leads, a national healthcare organisation that connects low-income patients with basic resources like food and housing. She spoke to low-income patients to assess their needs.