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Volunteer spirit alive and well

All it takes is the first step

LAST month, I interviewed a bunch of young people who are working for the HIV/AIDS cause for an article I was doing about young activists and volunteers.

The focus of the article was on the youths who attended the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) in Bali, Indonesia, in August. These youths were volunteers and activists back in their respective countries.

I also spoke to some Malaysian youths who were there and many of them lamented the fact that volunteerism is not a major part of our lives. These youths felt that they were only exposed to the concept much later in life, like when they pursued tertiary education.

When I first heard them say that, I wasn't sure I agreed. But, when I thought back about the time I started actively volunteering with NGOs and other organisations, I thought they could be right.

I was 19 when I first got involved in HIV/AIDS, when KL hosted the ICAAP in 1999. I was in college then and after that organised some charity events in the college.

When I went over to Australia a year later to further my studies, I continued volunteering – whether it was with the student guild, the Western Australia AIDS Council or a youth drop-in centre in the city.

But the more I think about it, I realised that maybe it wasn't really about "volunteering" and being exposed to the idea, but rather finding a cause or organisation that you connect to or feel pas-

sionately for.

While I was in school, I remember resisting the numerous organisations like the Interact Club or Leo Club which did a lot of charity work as part of their projects. I would imagine that many of the students who were members were exposed to the idea of helping others at a young age.

However, when it came to fundraising for the school or, I remember once, a home for children with Down's Syndrome, I was happy to help.

I haven't been that active since I returned to Malaysia after my studies seven years ago. I suppose initially, whatever "passion" I had to do good was put on hold as I tried to look for a job and hang on to it.

I found other ways of "doing good". Through my work with *The Star* BRATS, I have been involved in numerous projects including building a playground for orphans in Parit, Perak.

I have helped raise funds for homes for the unfortunate and underprivileged, gone into rural Sabah to conduct a youth development camp and, today, I am also part of the organising committee for Twestival KL.

My interest in Twestival KL comes, of course, from my Twitter addiction.

But it also came from hearing the story about Destiny Starting Point, the beneficiary of the event. It is a home for delinquents, all of whom are school dropouts.

When we were deciding on which home to help out, we heard stories about Destiny Starting Point having their water supply cut a couple of months back because they couldn't afford to pay their bills.

More than this, what really tugged our heartstrings was being told that the home had trouble with fundraising because of the stigma attached to delinquents.

My other friends on the committee believed that everyone deserved a second chance, and that is why we have committed to come together to make this project a big success.

And, at the end of the day, I think this is what will lead to getting people to volunteer and take up a cause. I'm not sure if it's a matter of age, or if age matters in the first place.

Because the moment a cause identifies with you – for whatever reason – it also means that you are in a position to help.

I may have started late but at the end of the day, I don't think it matters.

As long as you respond to an appeal to help when approached – whether it is helping an old person cross the road, sacrificing personal time to take up a cause or, in my case, mobilising a bunch of social media users to come together to make a difference – that is all there is to it.

And that is why I believe that the notion of volunteering to help people is inherent in all of us.

In the end, the people we are able to help are the ones that win. And that is really all that matters.

* Twestival KL will be held at Mist Club Bangsar tonight from 7pm to 10pm. Entry is by minimum donation of RM40 at the door. The first 150 people to arrive will take home a goodie bag. The Star RAGE is the official media partner for the event.

* Niki Cheong blogs at www.

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at www.twitter.com/nikicheong.



Reaching out: The residents of Destiny Starting Point, the beneficiary of Twestival KL, jamming at the home.