

## Community Focus; Breaking down barriers

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While some surveys show the divides of race and religion easing, others point to how class divisions are sharpening. In the second of an occasional series supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Senior Social Affairs Correspondent Theresa Tan explores how some young people and community groups are working to build a cohesive society.

Rental flat residents Marianna Bajuri, 42, and Suraiyah Mohamed Ghaus, 45, were initially apprehensive about mixing with their neighbours from the more affluent part of Whampoa estate.

Madam Marianna, who works as a cashier and is a divorcee with three children, said: "They have more money, are more successful and we worry that they think rental flat residents are low class."

But their worries were unfounded when they attended a picnic for Whampoa residents. Madam Suraiyah, a widow with five children, was so happy to be able to talk and joke with neighbours like lawyer Ada Chua, 26.

Ironically, what brought together the two sets of residents - those living in two-room rental flats and those in bigger flats - was tension at the start.

Some residents of the larger flats complained that youth from the rental flats were doing dangerous stunts and making noise late into the night at the estate's playground.

Last year, staff from Beyond Social Services, a charity, and volunteers from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) invited the two groups to gatherings for them to get to know each other, share their hopes for the estate and, in the process, resolve any tension.

Beyond community worker Izzaty Ishak said the playground complaints have eased. "My biggest takeaway is how important friendships are to build a community."

The One Whampoa community project has brought residents of different socio-economic backgrounds together.

Ms Chua, who lives in a condominium and went for the picnic, said she was impressed by the resourcefulness and talent of some of the children from poorer families.

The Whampoa project comes amid concern about growing social divisions, as highlighted by a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey that suggested the sharpest social divide may now be based on class. Those who were polled could easily name a friend of a different gender, age, race or religion, but not so for someone from another class.

This class divide could lead to a sense of alienation between different social classes, noted IPS deputy director Gillian Koh, one of the study's researchers.

She offered this analogy: "Within a family, there may be siblings who do better than others. The question is, 'Do members of the family allow this situation to erode the sense of belonging

or do they share their time and resources to benefit one another and develop a warm sense of all being part of one family?" "

Meanwhile, divisions of race and religion are still present - though observers note that these may be easing due to changing values and norms and a greater stress on diversity and inclusion.

Mr David Chua, chief executive of the National Youth Council, noted that the nationally representative National Youth Survey found that many young people have close friends of another race or religion.

The 2016 survey, which polled about 3,500 people aged between 15 and 34, found that 60 per cent have close friends of another race, up from 53 per cent in the 2013 survey. About 80 per cent have close friends of another religion in both the studies.

Mr Chua said more young people are making a difference, for example, by starting projects that bridge social divides or improve the lives of the marginalised.

Dr Koh said its study found that the "most robust" avenues for social mixing were education, sports, cultural activities and volunteerism.

For instance, students from different schools get to mix when they go for Outward Bound Singapore's (OBS) outdoor expedition programme.

And some of these students have kept up their friendships even after their time at OBS, said Mr Chua.

Besides avenues such as OBS, there are projects organised to bring people of different backgrounds together, with government grants available for such efforts. An example is the MCCY's Harmony Fund, which supports ground-up projects encouraging racial and religious harmony. Since its launch in 2013, it has supported over 100 projects, including interfaith conversations and conferences.

Over at the National Heritage Board, its group director of museums Kennie Ting said the board has made museums more accessible and inclusive for different groups, like people with disabilities and senior citizens. For example, the National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Peranakan Museum have "Quiet Mondays", where they open one hour earlier than usual so that those with special needs can have the museums to themselves.

Still, there is only so much that the Government can do, those interviewed said. It is also up to the individual to want to bridge the divides.

With technological and other changes disrupting entire industries and resulting in major job losses, a person's financial standing and social class are no longer set in stone, Nominated MP Kuik Shiao-Yin noted.

This could drive some people to be more aware of and concerned about class divide issues, she said.

Despite the various divides, many things bind Singaporeans together, from shared experiences, values, places, heritage and even food, said those interviewed.

As Ms Kuik put it: "Singapore is home - for good and for bad. It's like family, even if your family is not perfect, it is still what makes your family your family."