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How a student's pen-pal project connected teenagers in Hougang

The TL;DR: After noticing teenagers from lower-income communities in Hougang struggling to make connections within their neighbourhood, Lasalle student Masha Nyanna Wee Junyadi created a pen-pal programme to help them build friendships and support systems.

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Masha Nyanna Wee Junyadi presenting her project at Jom Jalan-Jalan!, a community walk put together by Lasalle students to showcase their work in the neighbourhood. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JAS ONG

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SINGAPORE – Whenever Masha Nyanna Wee Junyadi volunteered at community events, she was intrigued by a particular phenomenon: The adults would be locked in discussions while the children were engaged in games and craft activities.

However, the teenagers were “lingering” and “not really engaged” – too old to enjoy the children’s activities, but unable to relate to the adult conversations.

Yet, some still showed up even when they were not accompanying their parents or siblings.

“I was quite curious,” said the 22-year-old Lasalle student, who will graduate later in 2026 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Design for Social Futures. “Why do they still come?”

After volunteering at a few dinners organised by MakanBersama, a community initiative that hosts monthly shared meals and activities for young low-income families in Hougang, she realised many teens wanted to make friends outside of school, but struggled to find opportunities to do so.

Families and volunteers at the end of a MakanBersama dinner. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MASHA NYANNA

These observations formed the basis of her final-year project, In Spaces Between: The Starline Project, which explored how neighbourhoods could play a larger role in supporting adolescents from low-income families within the Hougang rental estate community.

It also led to the creation of a pen-pal project among youth in the neighbourhood.

The project was shaped partly by Nyanna's own experiences growing up in a low-income, single-parent household: "(I had) all these programmes and adults that were looking out for and believing in me," she said. "I think that's why I continue working with youth."

Her research found that youth from low-income families typically spent most of their time within their neighbourhood, usually due to financial constraints, familial responsibilities or parental restrictions. Yet, there were few community activities in the area that specifically targeted teenagers.

"No wonder they were coming to the dinners to try and find friends," Nyanna said. "There really aren't many opportunities or events for them in the neighbourhood to make friends."

At the same time, despite their desire to make friends, many of the teens found face-to-face conversations too intimidating.

For instance, when she hosted a modified game of Jenga for the teens with conversation prompts written on the blocks, many gave one-word answers and avoided elaborating.

In a modified game of Jenga with conversation prompts written on the blocks, many teenage players gave one-word answers and avoided elaborating. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CALLIE NG

Writing to connect

Nyanna began organising writing activities during the dinners, such as getting teenagers to write responses on coloured strips of paper before folding them into paper stars.

“Because they were first able to write down what they were feeling, it was easier to communicate or share,” she said.

The activity led her to start The Starline Project, a pen-pal programme to help teenagers build connections through

handwritten letters.

She recruited six teenagers, aged between 13 and 19, through MakanBersama and her own youth networks to join the five-week pilot programme, which ran between late February and early April.

Participants were paired and exchanged handwritten letters using pseudonyms. Each week, the pen pals received a worksheet of guided prompts and writing space for them to practise what they wanted to convey.

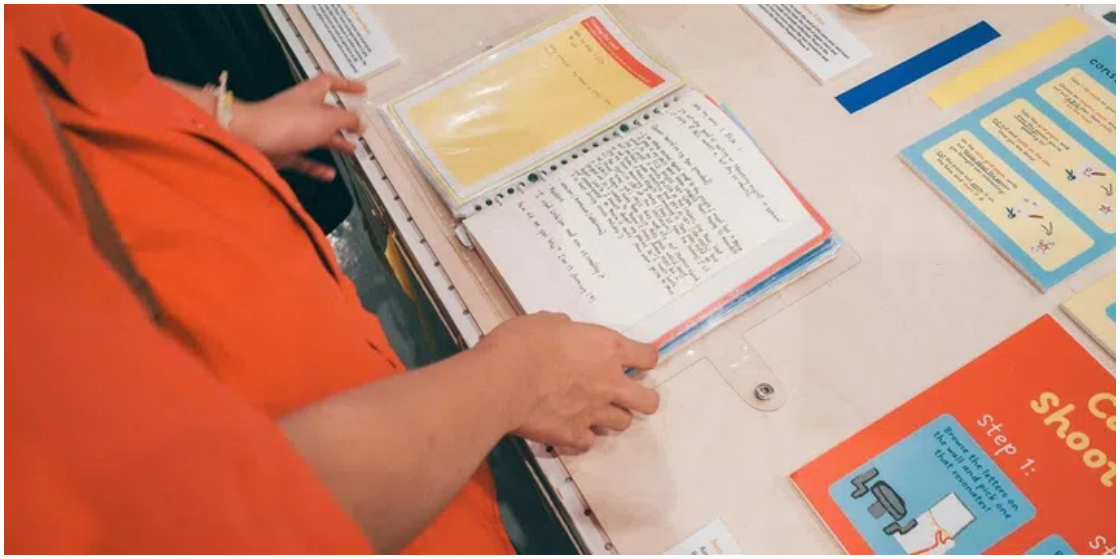
The prompts gradually moved from light-hearted introductions and fun facts to deeper reflections about fears, struggles and personal experiences.

For 14-year-old Erica Yeo, a Secondary 2 student from Peirce Secondary School, the experience changed how she thought about friendship.

“Originally, I thought you had to have a very close bond to be able to talk just as well as before after a long period of time,” she said. “But I feel that talking to someone frequently doesn’t make you friends – it’s knowing them.”

Through exchanging letters with her pen pal, who used the pseudonym Ethel in the programme, Erica found it easier to ask questions and discuss experiences that might have felt awkward in person.

“This project of writing letters has given me an alternative method of conversation,” she said. “It’s not really just writing letters to each other, but also sharing what’s happened in both of your lives.”



An A5 binder containing Erica's letters to her pen pal and weekly worksheets from the pilot programme. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ELIJAH CHIA

Although Erica is no longer in contact with her pen pal, she said the programme introduced her to peers she would not have met otherwise, and was inspired to write letters to her own friends.

For Nyanna, experiences like Erica's reinforced her belief that many teenagers are searching for connection, even if they do not always know how to build it. She also hopes the project reassures lonely teenagers that they are not alone.

"Even though we think teenagers have it all figured out and are able to do it on their own, it doesn't mean we can't help them along the way," she said.

In her dissertation, Nyanna explored how the project could be adapted for schools or as an individual exercise for teenagers trying to build confidence to reach out to others.

"My project is not a one-size-fits-all solution," she said. "It is a gateway to possibilities for people to look at issues differently, and an opportunity for us to reflect and take action on what we believe in."

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