



PRESIDENT S R Nathan is 83, but he is too preoccupied with work to think about growing old. Life is abundant. Besides, his wife tells him not to think about age, he says.

Though he accepted Insight's interview request to explore how today's "young old" like him are vibrantly redefining life and status after age 65, in an ironic yet illuminating sense he finds he has little to say – at least initially.

"I don't know what to say," he begins, and wonders aloud at what stage of life most people start thinking about ageing. Possibly it is when they are near retirement, he thinks.

But he himself has never hit retirement, after working for six decades-plus. However, there was an introspective moment long ago when he pictured himself retiring and fading:

"I thought I was going to retire at the age of 55. I thought to myself, well, the trees around you will continue to exist, you will fade away."

"But since then I have not retired. I have continued to work, so I hardly had time to sit down and reflect on ageing."

Indeed, after 55, the former medical social worker, high-ranking civil servant and pioneer Singaporean moved on to even more influential positions.

The roles included executive chairman of Straits Times Press, High Commissioner to Malaysia, and Ambassador to the United States.

In August 1999, he was elect-



He occupies a lofty office as Singapore's President, but S R Nathan has a social worker's heart for the elderly. **Lee Siew Hua** meets the pioneer Singaporean who thought he was going to retire at 55 but never did

President's tip on ageing: Don't think about it



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

FIND YOUR 'BRIGHT SPOT': For President Nathan, successful ageing is finding something to do – it can be work, a hobby, volunteering at your church or temple, or being a role model to the younger generation.

PEOPLE & POLITICS

THE NEW POST-65ERS

ed Singapore's President, and is currently serving his second six-year term.

Though he occupies the highest office in the land, he remains down-to-earth.

He retains the heart of a social worker, discussing in depth his concerns for older Singaporeans in a society where parameters have shifted, sometimes radically.

"There was a time when you always thought that older Singaporeans will be taken care of by their children," he says. "Increasingly, you are finding the extended family idea has ceased."

In a thoughtful mood that was brightened by many smiles one afternoon last week at the Istana, Mr Nathan describes the issue of vulnerable generational bonds but holds out some hope.

"A lot has been done by way of reminding the younger people about the importance of keeping in touch with their elders, looking after them, living nearby. Most are able to do it but some are just quite indifferent."

"You read of many instances of parents who are left to fend for themselves...and even occasional reports of parents who have been mistreated, parents who have been cheated."

Separate housing for the generations erased some closeness. Western ways are also a factor. He says:

"These are problems of an urban society, much influenced by the ways of Western society..."

"Many Westerners are surprised when they hear that you are living with your children or your children are living nearby."

"They think that after a certain age, you're free to move away. It's not the parents' responsibility to look after you, nor is it your responsibility to look after your parents."

Still, children here are mostly dutiful.

"We are still culturally very Asian, whether it's a matter of our faith or whether it's a matter of our upbringing. There's a certain consciousness about duty."

But alarming signs are rising in Asia. Even in Japan, with its heightened focus on the elderly,

there are more instances of the elderly fending for themselves, and even being homeless, he says.

"I suppose we are all impacted by global changes," he adds.

President Nathan would like young Singaporeans to visit hospices and homes for the aged regularly.

"Our emotional content with regard to our commitment to others needs to be beefed up," he says.

Each one of us has to break out of the "silk cocoon" we live in, he adds.

As Singapore ages, he notes that something is being done to rouse people from these cocoon perspectives and, on another level, to support families caring for the elderly in their midst.

"We are doing much to arouse the consciousness about ageing, about family responsibilities, about facilitating their upkeep through various services, which takes some of the burden away, especially when you have people who are handicapped, bedridden or have lost their memory," he says.

Nominate a post-65er

CAN you nominate someone like President S R Nathan who, even though beyond age 65, is a role model and still active in the community? The person can be from any sector of Singapore society, but should be one who causes us to rethink old age and view it as a time of possibility.

E-mail us at stpol@sph.com.sg or send an SMS to 9827-7514. For SMS messages, type stpol, followed by a space and then your message.

He is also mindful of the "very heavy strain" on the family in the absence of an extended family or a village for support.

"So the support services become important," he says.

Singaporeans are mostly career-minded, but this should never cause them to feel less for people, says the President, who has blended caring and career all his life.

"You find some people at the lower spectrum of employment, they are very conscious of their

obligations to their children and family."

One bright spot is that role models for successful ageing can rise from any segment of life.

"A role model doesn't have to be high-profile. Even within the family, within a small community, you can have role models that influence younger people."

For instance, older scouts influence younger ones, says Mr Nathan, the Chief Scout.

People too should search for their own bright spots. Simply



ST FILE PHOTO

KEEPING HEALTHY: President Nathan power-walks five times a week at the East Coast Park and, over the years, has tended to "peck" at food.



ST FILE PHOTO

EACH DAY A BLESSING: Mr Nathan, now 83, and his wife Urmila Nandey cutting his cake on his 80th birthday at the Raffles Hotel a few years ago.

find something to do – "and it does not have to involve work", he says.

"There are people who are interested in gardening or a hobby."

"There are people who go every day to the coffee shop for three hours and then their day is spent."

"There are people who work in a church or temple."

Choices abound. The only issue is, he says, "you must be having something to do."

For those who prefer or need work, he notes the national effort to make it easier for older Singaporeans to stay employed in some form.

"I think everyone recognises that you can't just cut off and say 'I'm going to rest'."

Even if it is an option of spending two or three hours at work and taking it easy after lunch, that is good, he thinks.

"But you are doing something. Because you are so used to getting up to work."

On a personal level, he does not deny the drawbacks of ageing, and is quite blunt.

"Ageing is ageing. We all age, we will all go," he says.

"But it doesn't dawn on you until a later age, or when there's a tragedy in the family, then you begin to feel these things. Otherwise the day passes on."

"I know it will happen. I know at some time, you will be physically or mentally affected."

Looking up, he says: "Let's hope the man up there will bless you with peace of mind and health so that you are not crippled."

Mr Nathan, who looks youthful for 83, continues to enjoy purpose, serenity – and his food.

"My liking for food remains; only I can't eat as much as I like."

With so many events on his presidential calendar, the rich, plentiful food makes him *jelak* (satiated), as the Malays say.

Over the years, he has tended to "peck" at food, and it is now a habit to consume less.

Musing, he adds: "You know it's strange; when you don't have anything, you like to eat many things. Then when you have the means to eat, you can't eat. That's how nature deals with you."

He power-walks five times a week at the East Coast Park.

For many years he has enjoyed the exercise, the outdoors, and the spontaneous meet-the-people sessions by the sea.

Out there are many retirees, but they tend to be a cheery lot and do not really raise ageing concerns with him.

"They have reached the stage when they can begin to enjoy the environment, the sea breeze, the waves, the ambience of East Coast Park, which the younger people have no time for."

Apart from lifestyle adjustments, has his relationship with his wife Urmila Nandey, five years younger than him, changed? They were teenage sweethearts who waited 16 years to marry, when he was 34 and she, 29.

With a twinkle in his eyes, he says: "The couple that grow older take each other for granted."

More seriously, he adds: "When one leaves, the impact it has on the other is tremendous. It's something missing from your life. I am not thinking of it just yet. I count each day my blessing."

Laughing again, he returns to his theme of not being preoccupied with age.

"That's what my wife says, don't think about it. You are as old as you think."

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