

# En route to the 'Third Age' at their own pace

BY NANCY LOH

THERE is no way my parents, in their 80s, could have participated in “trampoline bungee jumping” or rock climbing last Sunday, part of the current Active Ageing Festival. What about taking a 1km “gentle walk” alongside Singapore River tomorrow with their grandchildren to mark Grandparents’ Day, which is also part of the festival? Maybe.

To me, my parents have been living their lives the way the festival’s organisers, Council for Third Age, are promoting: active ageing. That is, growing older with the attitude of, among other things, making choices to optimise opportunities in order to lead fulfilling lives.

Like many old folks, mine are “active” in their subdued ways; they can’t do more. My father, 87, spends much of his time napping. Quite a party animal who knew his beers and...er...more, in his younger days – even long after my siblings and I had come along – he is now nodding off by 9pm. And while, for about 60 years, he had risen early (despite keeping late nights) to get to work, he now sleeps in.

Since 2002 when my father suffered a stroke, my 81-year-old mother’s main role has been that of caregiver. She takes charge of his medication and health supplements, and prepares an unending stream of nourishing soups and fruit and vegetable juice blends for him.

She hasn’t been able to satisfy his craving for stuff like turtle eggs, but at the drop of her apron, even though she has trouble walking, would take the bus to buy whatever he’s hankering after.

My parents are best friends but not just in a “companionable silence” sense – unless he’s in one of his periods of mental lull, which are getting alarmingly frequent. They chat and banter and I’m reminded of old photos of them at the Botanic Gardens or in swimsuits at the beach. He has always been short. Now he’s even smaller, resembling Yoda from Star Wars (minus the big ears), with ruddy cheeks – thanks to her ministering.

My father hadn’t always been so sedentary. He was born in Penang, the oldest of 12 children of a lorry driver father and housewife mother, and attended the Penang Free School, founded in 1816.

He had been, to use his own term (possibly to impress his grandchildren), “a good fighter” against school bullies preying on timid kids. After school, he would help with housework. At night, he would study by the light of a kerosene lamp and – after his mother died – while

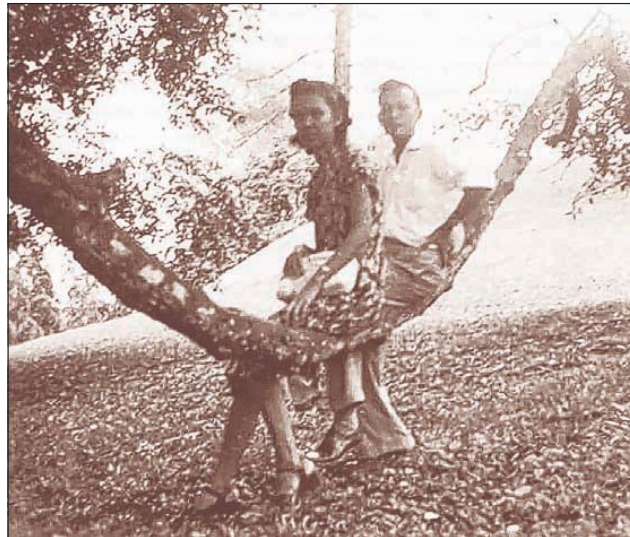


PHOTO: COURTESY OF LOH FAMILY

**STAYING ENGAGED:** The writer’s parents at the Botanic Gardens in the 1940s. They are the best of friends, always exchanging banter.

lulling to sleep his youngest sibling slung in a sarong cradle over his back.

Being poor but practical, he opted to go through two years of trade school after obtaining his Senior Cambridge School certificate, and then joined the British military as a technical assistant.

After the end of World War II, he came to Singapore to work and hence began his own skills upgrading.

He took courses with City & Guilds, a British examination and accreditation body, and joined the then Public Works Department. The department offered him a scholarship to study chartered quantity surveying in Britain. But he turned it down, preferring to do it his way – keeping the family intact in Singapore while juggling studies with family and work, not to mention an active social life.

In 1975, aged 55, my father retired as a quantity surveyor. Over the next 27 years, he con-

tinued working on contracts with building consultancies. Five years ago, aged 82, while awaiting a new contract, he suffered the stroke.

Six decades of work attachment must be very hard to shake off. One morning several months ago, he got out of bed to “go to work”. His momentary confusion was disturbing. He’s been teasing us (I hope) about rejoining the workforce to support the Government’s stance.

My father loves talking to his eight grandchildren about how he had to live by his wits during the war. (Sorry to say, they don’t always share his enthusiasm for engagement.) When he’s taken out to dinner and on car rides, he shows zest. But if he doesn’t feel like going, he’ll just say so; with my old man, there’s never been a need for mind games.

And I like that when he reminisces about places such as the colonial offices at Fort Canning and Dempsey Road where he

had worked, now transformed into foodies’ delights, he does so with scant sadness.

Old age has brought him a spiritual dimension. From being a stubborn free thinker for decades – much to a pastor uncle’s despair – religious blessings now roll off his tongue. But the way I see it, common nuggets of wisdom – seize the day; live and let live; que sera sera – were what shaped his attitude. He has the ability to just do it, and then just let go. Because life goes on.

My father has adjusted well to ageing. The greatest angst I’ve seen him express was to mutter “bloodsuckers” while relating how the hospital nurses had repeatedly extracted his blood for tests. His brows were knitted, his vitriol so uncharacteristic of his good nature that it was quite comical.

While the husband had been a work warrior, the wife had held the domestic fort. In the early 1950s, my mother sacrificed a chance to join Shell as a typist in order to continue being a, what we now call, “stay-home mum”. She went on to care for three grandchildren, becoming a pillar of support for their families.

Besides being a granny whose cooking the youngest grandchild touts as “it’s all free and the best in the world!”, my mother has her modest community outreach efforts. She stays in touch with old, immobile relatives and friends to cheer them up. And until recently, she had joined in sing-along sessions at the homes of old folks and leprosy sufferers.

She has sewn and given to all of us more than two dozen patchwork blankets. The designs aren’t always to my taste. But I cherish them for their symbolism: comfort, connection and continuity.

Five “active agers” will receive awards from the Council for Third Age in recognition of their active ageing next Saturday. Like them, my parents and many other seniors have embraced active ageing – in spirit if not totally in body, within the family or beyond. They’ve had long journeys. They’ve made changes in their autumn years in the ways they know how. They’ve paid their dues.

Many seniors have climbed their own mountains, but no matter how they wish to challenge their self-limiting beliefs, they won’t be able to make it up a rock wall. That will have to be left to the, well, younger “agers”. But a walk along Singapore River? No problem.

As my father says, he has his “wheels”. Indeed. All that’s needed is a pair of willing hands to push him along.

[nloh@sph.com.sg](mailto:nloh@sph.com.sg)

The writer is a freelance writer and part-time sub-editor with The Straits Times.