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Teenage mum finds new lease of life

When 17 year-old Teo Rui Fen learnt that she was pregnant, her world crashed. Rui Fen felt lost and directionless. Compounding her woe was the rejection of her study application. Her dream to be a pastry chef was dashed. She feared for her future.

Rui Fen hid her pregnancy from her mother for as long as she could. She began working at her mother's workplace, selling fried dough sticks at a food court. Serene was gaining weight every day which was noticed by her mother's colleagues. They voiced their concerns to her mother who then spoke to Rui Fen. Rui Fen knew that she could not hide her pregnancy any longer and confessed. The mother was angry initially, but grew to accept and support Rui Fen. In August 2013, Rui Fen married her boyfriend and delivered a son in the same month.

During Rui Fen's confinement, she was introduced to the Vocational and Soft Skills Programme (VaSSP) by a social worker who understood the challenges faced by a young mother. The VaSSP is an initiative by **YMCA Project Bridge** which aims to equip out-of-school youths and youths-at-risk, between the ages of 15 to 21 years, with job competency as well as specific vocational skills in Hairdressing, Baking, Makeup, Hospitality and Western Culinary.

Ms Samantha Seah, Assistant General Secretary, Programmes, YMCA of Singapore, said that developing and empowering youths is part of YMCA's mission.

"Through the VaSSP, YMCA works with partners who share our goal to develop and inspire youths to find their niche in life," said Ms Seah. "Our partners not only include youth-friendly employers, but also donors such as J.P. Morgan."

Ms Jacqueline Brabazon, JP Morgan's Managing Director and Head of Asia Marketing said, "YMCA Project Bridge is clearly having a positive impact on the community and J.P. Morgan is pleased to be able to be part of this movement to nurture youths with practical skills."

The VaSSP comprises three phases: Core training which includes job search skills and interpersonal skills; a one month vocation training course of their choosing; and finally on-the-job training for three to six months with an employer. Since its inception in 2011, the VaSSP has trained 420 youths with an 80% success rate*.

Rui Fen is now 19 years-old. She has successfully completed the VaSSP and is a trained baker now. She was offered full-time employment at an award-winning Italian restaurant after her 3-month long on-the-job training there and was given the opportunity to participate in the setting up of a new outlet. Rui Fen has been working there for 9 months now.

Rui Fen is confident of her future. The VaSSP reignited her desire to pursue her dream of becoming a pastry chef. She looks forward to learning as much as she can from her current job with the eventual goal of furthering her skills in baking and pastry making. She looks forward to providing a better life for her family.

** Success is defined as youths who have secured work attachments, employment or returned to school to continue education.*

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About YMCA of Singapore

YMCA of Singapore is a volunteer-based Christian organisation that seeks to serve and impact all members of the community, regardless of race, language or religion, through programmes, services and enterprises to develop the body, mind and spirit. YMCA organises 16 structured and sustained YMCA-Tan Chin Tuan Community Service Programmes to enrich the lives of the beneficiaries from 32 partnering voluntary welfare organisations and self-help groups. The beneficiaries include the intellectually and physically challenged, out-of-school youth and youth-at-risk, abused and underprivileged children, the visually and hearing impaired, the elderly and the poor. Some of the other programmes include the YMCA-Lim Kim San Volunteers Programme, overseas community service programmes, rebuilding programmes for disaster-hit communities and YMCA Financial Assistance & Capability for Employment Scheme. YMCA was conferred the 2008 Outstanding Non-Profit Organisation Award by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre on 13 November 2008; and won the Charity Governance Award (CGA) in the Large Charities category on 25 October 2013. The organisation also runs social enterprises, such as the YMCA International House, YMCA Child Development Centres and Student Care Centres, YMCA School and YMCA Tertiary education programmes.

About YMCA Project Bridge

YMCA Project Bridge reaches out to youths-at-risk and out-of-school youths aged 13 to 19 through meaningful programmes, with the aim to integrate them back into the society. To enrich their lives and help them improve on their social skills, youths at YMCA Project Bridge are given opportunities to serve in YMCA community service programmes locally and overseas, attend adventure and sports camps and participate in enrichment programmes with the involvement of volunteers.

In 2012, YMCA Project Bridge reached out to more than 500 youths through 54 schools and VWOs in Singapore. During the year, YMCA Project Bridge case

workers conducted over 1,300 hours of counselling and intervention sessions for the youths.

A new YMCA Project Bridge Vocational Centre was opened in July 2012. This Centre aims to reinforce YMCA Project Bridge's outreach efforts by equipping out-of-school youths and youths-at-risk aged 15 to 21 years with vocational skills including Baking, Hairdressing, Hospitality and Makeup.