

» CHARITY SECTOR

With just a little help from friends



BY YAP SU-YIN

IT WAS a Saturday morning in the assembly hall of Shines Institute, a private school. The youthful camp, faced with a bleary-eyed crowd of officials and volunteers from charity organisations, was trying to prep them for the cheque-presentation ceremony that would begin shortly.

"When the minister enters, remember to clap and cheer in your loudest voice. Let's rehearse now," he enthused, in his best cheerleader-voice.

Alas, he could only summon up muted applause.

This made me think: Blighted by one setback after another, would Singapore's charity sector be so beaten that it would forget how to give itself a pat on the back? Even when there was good reason to cheer?

After all, before the morning was through, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), one of Singapore's oldest voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) at 105 years old, would have received one of the more generous gifts from a single donor to a VWO this year. The Tan

Chin Tuan Foundation was giving it \$990,000.

For a sector clouded recently by news that the St John's Home for Elderly Persons had had most of its reserves cleaned out, allegedly by a staff member, this gift was a silver lining.

Despite the series of scandals involving a handful of VWOs, grantmakers are still willing to give to charities, and to back meaningful causes. Donors too, from the sound of it.

Following the news of the \$3.88 million sum missing from the coffers of St John's Home, at least 20 new donors rallied to the aid of the home, where four in 10 of its 62 elderly residents are destitute. Together, the new donors have given more than \$100,000 to the home.

This response is a world apart from the ferocious public outcry in the aftermath of the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) saga in 2005.

Then, thousands of scandalised donors withdrew their Lifedrops donations to one of Singapore's largest charities.

The Lifedrops donations are monthly Giro contribu-

tions from the public that go towards supporting the cost of kidney dialysis treatment for the charity's patients.

Till today, NKF's Lifedrops donor numbers have not fully recovered their lost ground.

Clearly though, some good has come from the bad.

There is an ongoing public consultation exercise (until Aug 31) regarding the draft Code of Governance by the Code and the Council – not to mention a full-time charities commissioner and tougher charity rules – kicked in as a result of the regulatory oversight and governance problems that had rattled public confidence in charities.

Come September, there may be more changes in the non-profit sector, as part of the Government's plan to make Singapore a philanthropy hub includes changes to existing rules on VWO fund-raising and spending.

Dr Sunoor Verma, an international consultant on strategic partnerships, says global groups are showing interest in Singapore.

He was in Singapore to study the feasibility of a lead-

ing international NGO locating an office here.

On why the scandals have not frightened them away, he said: "It's evident that here, there is the courage to examine such things publicly rather than pushing them under the carpet. There is value in that."

Dr Sunoor added that Singapore has many "laudable and unique programmes" that foreign organisations could learn from, such as its early childhood and disability schemes.

And there is the approach of many helping hands, he said, "the very attractive."

"Rather than helping hands that don't know what the other hands are doing, here the hands know what the other hands are doing, allowing for leverage on each other's strengths."

"To me, Singapore was constantly a learning process, with each organisation learning from each other by coming together."

Even so, VWOs have to keep their eyes on the ball, and keep adding value to the causes they serve.

The Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, for instance, wants to leverage on YMCA's capabilities to benefit other deserving groups. It hopes the partnership can set an example for more companies, foundations and groups to collaborate with bigger VWOs, which are in a position to help others, said a YMCA member.

The YMCA will use the extra funds to expand pro-

grammes that involve the intellectually, mentally and physically challenged; extend its outreach to include new programmes for varied beneficiaries, such as children and the elderly; as well as grow the number of active volunteers by about 1,000 and beef up their skills.

Which brings me back to that Saturday event.

Out in the school field, which was transformed into an outdoor campsite called Shines Outdoor, more than 100 teenagers with special needs from various partner VWOs were gathered.

They were part of the bi-annual adventure camp called the Y Camp Challenge, one of the YMCA community service programmes for the intellectually and mentally challenged.

Obscured by the crowd, a group was preparing to scale a wall designed for rock-climbing. A boy with Down's syndrome, hunched over the wall. He was secured by a harness and rope, led at one end by three buddies. Barely a body's length above the ground, he trembled from the strain, groaned and fell.

I thought, that was it. But the spirited boy picked himself up and threw himself back at the task. His every step up brought cheers from his buddies and the surrounding youth volunteers.

Just like him, charities that "fall" can get back up and climb that wall.

A sector with such a big heart is rich in friends. Some give money, some give time, and others gladly offer that pat on the back when it is due.

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