

ASK To Train

By **Naseema Banu Maideen**

Many did not have the chance to advance to secondary school. And although they worked in one, the closest they came to a student's chair and table was cleaning them and arranging them into neat rows after sweeping the classroom floor. But on 19 March 2009, 31 of them sat in the very classrooms they clean – as students.

On an ordinary day, they work as cleaners, kitchen helpers and general attendants at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary and Primary School. But on this day, during the March school break, they are “students” in an Attitude, Skills and Knowledge (ASK) workshop, organised by NTUC’s Unit for Contract and Casual Workers.

The training chart for these “students”, aged 40 to 70, is as follows:

- ASK Workshop => Computer Adaptive Test to be assessed on their literacy and numeracy skills.
- CAT => Workplace Literacy and Numeracy courses.
- WPLN => Vocational training courses.

By then, they would be able to advance to higher training for their chosen vocation.

It was UCCW that mooted the idea of holding an ASK Workshop during the March school break at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School. The school would have less human traffic and a lower demand of work for its non-teaching staff. On-site training would offer the most convenience for them to undergo the preparatory course before embarking on WLPN course which forms the foundation for further learning.



All Ready To Learn... UCCW brings training on-site for contract and casual workers of Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School.

Just A Nudge

Madam Wong Fook Lin, 62, is the team leader of the contract cleaners at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Primary School. She had attended school until Primary 3 but speaks standard English, a skill she picked up from the children



All Set To Train... Mr Choy Hoong Kong (left) and Madam Wong Fook Lin in class.

of European families for whom her mother cleaned houses.

When UCCW told her it was arranging for an ASK workshop to be organised on-site her workplace for UCCW members, Madam Wong quickly spread the word to her fellow workmates.

“One or two asked me what’s the point of training at this age. I said attending a course in the classroom would be reliving an experience after many years. I said I am going for it too and asked them to sign up and keep me company,” said Madam Wong.

If all of them signed up for the workshop for this reason, they soon found another to stay.

Madam Rosmiah Reck, 45, has been working as a cleaner at the school for three years. The only training she has undergone was a session on cleaning methods for different floor types.

“I had never thought of doing something else

besides cleaning. Now, I know that with some training, I can do a different job, and maybe, get a better pay. I’m quite scared. But I think having basic skills like arithmetic and reading and writing English are useful,” she said in Malay, also through a translator.

For Mr Choy Hoong Kong, 52, the workshop helped him mark out a different training route. The general attendant is a skilled worker who had previously worked in a shipyard.

“I was retrenched three years ago and contract work was all that I could secure. Attending the ASK workshop has reminded me that I can do something better. I will train to become, maybe, a sales assistant.”

To realise this ambition, Mr Choy can enroll for the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications in the retail industry after gaining basic employability skills at e2i (Employment and Employability Institute).

“From our interaction with the non-teaching staff at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School, we found that they lack confidence, self-esteem and afraid to try anything new. They need encouragement and assurance. With the support of the school, we encouraged the contract workers, who are all UCCW members, to take the first step to upgrade themselves to enhance their employability – be it upward mobility, new responsibilities in an enlarged jobscope or even job opportunities elsewhere. We hope to help them step by step during their journey of learning.”

Sylvia Choo, UCCW Deputy Director

“One of our school’s strategic thrust is to develop quality staff, be it teaching or non-teaching staff. We were excited on hearing about this training workshop because besides providing our contract employees with basic literacy and numeracy, there is also a vocational component incorporated. If they become skilled and move on to other sectors, they will be presented with many opportunities, and I wish them well.”

Grace Chua, Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School Vice-Principal



Mr Khamis Abdul Ghani.

Mr Khamis Abdul Ghani, 59, has worked as a security officer, in pest control services, forklift driving and is presently a landscape technician. He wants to try his hand at landscape management. He knows there is no end to learning and he is keen to upgrade himself.

“I want to stay employable in order to support my family. So, if I have to learn and re-learn and train and re-train, I will do so.”

The ASK workshop was organised by the Unit for Contract and Casual Workers.

Taking One Step At A Time

BEING present at the Attitude, Skills and Knowledge (ASK) workshop was an achievement in itself, as contract and casual workers are generally a shy lot and often afraid to venture into new challenges.

Among those who waited anxiously for their lesson at e2i (Employment and Employability Institute) on 21 March 2009 was Miss Seetha Kunasegaran (picture), 26, a cleaning supervisor at Qihua Primary School. While holding on to a National Institute of Technical Education Certificate in Mechatronics, she had tried her hand at running a business that offered garlands for Hindu prayers and funeral services. She could not sustain the business and gave it up.

“Before signing up for this course, I was

afraid to take up any new challenges. I had always thought I can’t go further, I can’t be better because I only have an ITE certificate. Today, I have a different view. Maybe I can become a healthcare assistant,” said Miss Seetha.



Returning To The Classroom

IRO Frank Lok Sits Through Lessons With Workers

By **Jansen Yeo**

He can be found at the back of the classroom. He does not take any notes. Neither does he ask the lecturer any questions. What he does is give the students a sense of confidence. He is Frank Lok, Industrial Relations Consultant and Deputy Executive Secretary of the Chemical Industries Employees’ Union and the students are workers, mostly NTUC members, undertaking upgrading courses.

Since he joined the National Trades Union Congress in 1994, he has “sat in” classrooms countless times. Although he does not do this often these days, the other Industrial Relations Officers are carrying on this practice.

Mr Lok recalls workers had to be coerced to attend training courses in the 1990s.

“When the Skills Redevelopment Programme was introduced, I had to go to various workplaces to plead with workers to sign up for training. Many saw training as inconvenient and disruptive to their comfortable work routine, while others shied away because they lacked the confidence to participate in lessons again. They had a mental block, that if they could not study when they were in school, they would not be able to after being out of the education system for so many years.”

To make the environment less intimidating, Mr Lok arranged for clusters of workmates to be put in the same class so that there were familiar faces around.

“Many times, IROs like me sat through the lessons to give workers added confidence. We were like ‘security blankets’.”

Things are different now. More workers realise the importance of enhancing their employability and go for training when they have the chance.

“It was a workers’ world then. Workers could pick and choose their jobs. If they

were retrenched from one job, they could easily and quickly transit to another.

“But we are in a global recession and there are less employment opportunities, especially low-skilled jobs that require minimal skills and education. Workers know that they need improved skills in order to secure employment again if they get retrenched.”

In the current downturn, one particular group of workers worries Mr Lok – older, unskilled workers.

“This is the most vulnerable group. Many have been with their low-skilled jobs for their entire lives. They realise that it would be impossible for them to find similar jobs if they are retrenched because their job-types have been relocated to countries with cheaper operational costs. Thus, it is vital for them to train and upgrade, move into new jobs in the growth sectors if they wish to continue working.”

Frank Lok continues to persuade workers to go for upgrading courses. And workers can count on him returning to classroom with them.

