

FACE IT

By Seng Han Thong

In this self-penned article published in the latest issue of the People's Action Party (PAP) magazine, Yio Chu Kang MP Seng Han Thong, 59, recounts the events leading up to the attack on Jan 11, the impact on his family, and his recovery process from 15 per cent burns over his body, which has required him to be hospitalised for 28 days and undergo several skin grafts.

I NEVER expect to meet with such a misfortune at a community function where we cared for and shared with our needy families and senior citizens with many grassroots leaders around.

One good friend asked me: Were you brave and upbeat from the beginning? Indeed, in life, we always encounter challenges, problems, issues which need our immediate response. As to this misfortune, what had happened had happened. I was set on fire and suffered severe burns on my face, shoulder, arms and chest. There was no use blaming anyone or carping on it. I could not undo the incident. So, the best way and only way is to face it, rather than fear it, and overcome it rationally and decisively.

I was more determined to fight on despite the physical pain and sufferings and to focus on my recovery when I saw Cabinet Ministers, current and former MPs, grassroots leaders, union leaders, community leaders, colleagues, friends and relatives all coming in full force to give my family and me support and encouragement. Their visits greatly boosted the morale and confidence of my family members at this difficult period. My family members, especially my mother and wife, gained faith each day when they saw how I was able to relate my progress to the visitors.

I suffered 14 per cent burns. My second younger sister told my mother, "Brother in fact suffered 28 per cent as the skin grafting would take 14 per cent of his good skin from his thigh and back." She was right that I had to bear with this extra pain and bleeding of the donor part, especially in the night. I did not tell my family as they had already suffered too much because of my predicament.

Indeed, from the family statement which I read later when I was able to read the newspaper cuttings prepared by my sister, I could imagine how painful it was to them. It said, "We are struggling with reality. The sight of our loved one, who is so full of life and now lying in great pain, unable to speak, immobilized, hooked to a respirator and an array of medical equipment, is so shocking."

It added that the pain felt by the family, especially my mother, is beyond any description and imagination.

My mother, wife, siblings and their spouses as well as my daughter took turns to come in from early in the morning to take care of me and the strings of visitors. They were worried and tired, but with the strong support from the Party, the grassroots, relatives and

friends, they were also confident of my recovery.

The misfortune happened on a busy Sunday. I had finished handling out bursaries and hongbaos to about 150 needy students and senior citizens and was just settling down to lunch when the attacker approached from behind, poured thinner on me and set me on fire.

Before I left home that morning, I told my mother and wife that I had to attend to two community Rice Parties, one late afternoon function and one wedding dinner. I was supposed to leave the first lunch early and to come back home to fetch my wife for the second Rice Party as we were both invited.

My wife was waiting for my call. But when the phone finally rang, it was the disastrous news that I was burnt and was being rushed to Singapore General Hospital. She met me in hospital, in shock and in tears.

On the way to the SGH in the ambulance, I tried to console the temple chief, Mr Aw Chui Seng, who was also burnt while trying to save me. We were having lunch together and he was seated just next to me. I looked at my hands and fingers. They had been badly burnt. What I did not know then was that my injury went beyond this.

When we reached the Accident and Emergency department, my eldest younger sister was already there. She was joined by my mother, wife and daughter. All were in tears. My mother lamented and sighed: "You worked so hard. You don't deserve this."

Doctors told me that they would do whatever they could to save me. I have faith in our system, our doctors and nurses. I knew that I was about to be operated on. The doctors told me about the various options they might take and asked for my preference. I replied, "You are the expert, just take the option you deem best."

Party Secretary General, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Mrs Lee, together with Dr Balaji and his wife arrived shortly, PM Lee consoled me and said "Han Thong, it is really unfortunate, it is really unfortunate. Be reassured that the doctors will do their best. Just concentrate on getting well and we (MPs from AMK GRC) will cover the work of Yio Chu Kang."

I was still able to respond to PM and Mrs Lee but thereafter, I was sedated. I did not know that MM Lee, DPM Wong, Minister Teo Chee Hean and many others had also rushed to the hospital, until much later, when I learnt it from the press reports.

In the first five days when I was confined to the ICU, I was intubated and my swollen arms were tied to the bed to prevent me from pulling the tube out of my mouth in case I had nightmares in my sleep. Many tubes were entwined around my body as I was hooked on to many machines. I could not talk. Nor could I eat or drink, or sleep well. I knew that the skin from my thigh and back had been removed for the grafting and the pain was excruciating. But each day, I felt better with the string of doctors and nurses attending to me and telling me about my progress, though I could not then respond.

One day I heard a voice saying "I am Lee Kuan Yew". I then realized that Minister

Mentor Lee was at my bedside checking my condition with the doctors. He was very concerned about my vital organs and senses, especially my hearing and eyesight. I learnt of this subsequently when the doctor told me that MM Lee came to see me a second time on the second day of my admission. He told MM Lee that I could hear him and thus I heard MM Lee calling me. I could sense the anxiety in his voice but could not respond a word to him.

MM Lee came the third time when I was out of the Intensive Care Unit. After eight days in bed, I had to get back my balance by learning to walk in the room. I could also read the newspapers and tune in to the radio. When he saw me catching up with the outside world, he reassured me, "We have the best burns centre in this region and it is lucky that your eyesight and hearing were not affected." I was indeed fortunate that the thinner did not trickle down my face, otherwise I would have been more disfigured and the injury could have been worse. I thanked him for his care and concern and told him that my mother was especially traumatized. Subsequently, I saw MM Lee talking to my mother and wife. Each time he visited me, he gave me and my family the motivation to battle on.

On one of the nights, it was way past ten and I was unable to sleep. My family had left for the day and I was flipping through the Visitors' book. It is a book of encouragement and inspiration, containing the greetings and well wishes of the many visitors. I learnt that many of our comrades, including former MPs, had visited me but they were not able to see me as I was receiving treatments. Just then, MM Lee came by for a night visit. I was very surprised to see him in my ward at that hour. I told him that I was receiving hyperbaric treatment to speed up the recovery of my wounds, especially my ears. I was deeply touched by his concern and asked him to also take good care of Mrs Lee at home.

My hands were skin grafted and I had intensive occupational and physiotherapy to prevent stiff hands. As part of the hand therapy, I was advised to practise my handwriting. As the Lunar New Year was round the corner, I started signing my self-made greeting cards for the doctors and nurses who have been taking care of me. I also signed the cards for friends and comrades who visited me.

MM Lee visited me the fifth time on the day before Chinese New Year eve. I was signing the cards when he came by and he was happy to note that I could sign without much difficulty. I wrote "*Good Health and Good Life*" on the card for him and wished him a happy new year with the card and two mandarin oranges.

Party Whip and NTUC Secretary General Lim Swee Say visited me the day after the incident when he just touched down from an overseas trip. He told my mother that he felt sad as I was suffering from very severe swelling and he could not recognize me. He reassured my family not to worry about the medical cost as I am fully covered under the insurance scheme. SG Lim came back the same day again to console my family. On Chinese New Year Day, SG Lim and Mrs Lim came to wish me well. I presented to him the greeting card with the message: "Press on in the year of the Oxen. Do not fear of the opposite tides."

During the NTUC annual Workplan Seminar, SG Lim cited my Chinese New Year card to encourage the labour movement to embrace positive energy even in adversity to 500

unionists and NTUC staff. Indeed, it was the positive energy from all visitors, including many brothers and sisters from the labour movement, who gave me this positive energy to fight on. They are the workers from different sectors, on different shifts, including taxi drivers, who rushed to see me after their duties.

I was discharged after a 28-day stay. The day before, PM Lee and Mrs Lee visited me and told me they were happy that I was going home. My family and I were in good spirits as we were clearing the room and packing my belongings. Doctors and nurses also bade farewell to me. PM Lee noted that I need to undergo physiotherapy treatment after my discharge and wished me a speedy recovery. Two days later, PM Lee attended the Chinese New Year dinner at Yio Chu Kang and updated the residents on me. PM also conveyed my message to the residents.

The doctor-in-charge, Associate Professor Colin Song, gave me home hospitalization leave followed by light duty medical leave up to July. PM Lee called to enquire about my progress and reminded me not to worry about constituency work. All these while, Comrades Inderjit Singh, Wee Siew Kim, Lam Pin Min and Lee Bee Wah have been covering my Meet-The-People Sessions and other community functions. I am deeply grateful for their support and help.

Indeed, I am grateful to all comrades who showed their care and concern during the period when all were busy in Parliament for the budget debate. Many Ministers and MPs came more than once. Deputy Prime Minister Wong also brought along New Year card and oranges. DPM Jayakumar gave me the book Pedra Branca co-authored and co-autographed by him and Professor Tommy Koh. Party Chairman Lim Boon Heng assured the smooth running of the branch. Comrades Mah Bow Tan and Tharman shared with me their preferred quotes. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong followed up by calling my house from time to time to update himself.

And when Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan and MCYS Minister Vivian who was the former chief of SGH visited me, it was as if they were returning home checking on all details to ensure that I got the best. Transport Minister Raymond Lim knew that I was concerned about the livelihood of taxi drivers and informed me that he had announced many measures which would help the cabbies too. Dr Lee Boon Yang related to me the life philosophy. Foreign Minister George Yeo shared with my family anecdotes and also expressed his views in his blog. Comrade Tuck Yew carried a pot of orchid all the way to the ward while Hwee Hua was always the first visitor of the day to wish me good morning. Chee How came again and again to share with my family members his care and concern.

My sister shared with Minister Teo Chee Hean who visited me several times and had conversations with my mother that she observed these PAP values in everyone. She said that though the Ministers, MPs and Party members were busy, they all found time to visit me. Most importantly, they were sincere and compassionate. These visits had given my family much comfort, trust and confidence.

It was indeed home sweet home. My younger brother bought a set of air refresher and dehumidifier machine so that I could have a clean and dry environment to recuperate and

recover. Our family also had a belated reunion dinner the next day, which happened to be the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year. My son, who is pursuing his study overseas, called to welcome me home. He had sent me a huge get-well card hand designed by him. He wanted to rush back on hearing the news but was advised not to. My family kept him updated daily.

Through out my stay in hospital, many of my old friends and former colleagues from the media and publications industry whom we had not met for a long time, visited me and touched me very much. Mr Mok Lee Kwang, 83, Editor during the Nanyang Siang Pau days, came with a staff in his right hand. When he saw me, his tears flew without saying a word. I knew that the sight of me pained him. I saw from his eyes that he wished me to be stronger. I got his message but could not utter a word at that moment. When Lim Jim Koon, Editor of Zaobao visited me with many journalist friends, he said, “Han Thong, you will emerge stronger. We all wish you well”.

Many other colleagues from SPH visited me, including Chairman of SPH, Dr Tony Tan and journalists and management staff of various divisions. They brought along books, magazines and newspapers to cheer me up. Their well wishes carried in so many words, spoken or unspoken, had one common message : they all wanted me to be stronger.

Despite what has happened, I have been in high spirits all this while. The impairment is just physical and I know that I am making great progress. In fact, when I was taken off the respirator and took my first drop of water, I already told myself that “The worst is over and I must have the positive energy to ensure a speedy recovery.” I also reminded myself not to look back. A nurse had asked me if I had looked at the mirror to see my progress. I told her it was not necessary because I could see it from my daughter's face.

It is my family – my mother, wife, children, brother and sisters, in-laws and relatives, the bigger family of PAP comrades, the Cabinet and fellow MPs and the biggest family of Singapore with our grassroots leaders, friends and well wishers many of whom I do not know, that give me the strength to carry forth.

I am now on the road of recovery, slowly but steadily. I receive physiotherapy and occupational therapy treatments as an outpatient. Each time, my mother and my wife accompany me as my youngest sister ferry us and coordinate with the hospital. They know that I still have months of therapy to go through before I will regain most of my capabilities but they are positive. They know that as a burns victim, my lifestyle will not be the same in the next one two years, but they are optimistic.

As President Nathan told me during his visit: In life, we must have faith. We might not be able to stop something from happening. But when it happens, we must have faith to deal with it.

My mother and wife also said to me, “Something worse could have happened to you. Now that the accident has happened; let us move on.”

Yes, I faced this accident with faith and I faced it with the positive mindset that radiates from everyone around me. I have indeed move on.

