

disabilities. Once, he slipped on the toilet ramp and hurt the back of his head. "I'm accustomed to the old place," he laments. Even after a year, he still can't find his way to the toilet by himself.

NO PRIVACY

Mr. Lim Kah Lee, a renowned painter and the de facto "voice" of Silra Home, says plainly that nothing has been done to address residents' complaints. "There is still no privacy and the ward is too open. It is too difficult to go to the bathroom to change our clothes every time, too inconvenient and troublesome."

Something did change, but only at a high cost. Mr. Lim and Mr. Tan Ah Boon related to me that Mr. Lim Ah Liat, a wheelchair-ridden resident in his 70s, went to the toilet on the second floor at night about two months ago. He fell off his wheelchair on the ramp when leaving the toilet, and died. Staff discovered his body at about 3.30 a.m.

Mr. Lim had been unwell and taking medication, so it is difficult to say how much the fall had to do with his death. Soon after, volunteers staged a skit on how to use the toilet safely. More importantly, the management placed a large aluminium sheet with a patterned surface about four feet long over the ramp in two toilets on the second floor, reducing the angle of the incline and providing a better grip for the wheels.

Mr. Lim Kah Lee tells me the sheets are

being tested for a trial period and there have been no incidents since. The wheels of progress generally turn fast in Singapore but, despite many appeals by residents from the beginning over the toilet ramps, not quickly enough for when it comes to catering to the needs of former leprosy sufferers.

Between those who look back nostalgically to the old home, and the few who reject the present Silra Home premises outright, the majority of residents have come to terms with their new environment, just as they have done repeatedly throughout their lives. The result is a perspective on life that straddles resilience and resignation.

Mr. Lim Ah Hin, a charming man with a small, wiry frame and thick spectacles who plays the harmonica, says he is "simply waiting to die." Mr. Tan Teow Meng, one of the most vigorous persons in the home, tells me, "I am now so old. The future? I will have no more road to walk. Now, what I wish for most is to simply pass my days, live my life, that's all."

At the very least, they deserve to live out their remaining years with all due consideration given to their needs and dignity.

The article is based on interviews with the following residents of Silra Home, Singapore, in September-November 2005, and February and September 2006: Chan Mun Tuck, Kuang Wee Kee, Lim Ah Hin, Lim Kah Lee, Ow Ah Mui, Tan Ah Boon, Joseph Tan, and Tan Teow Meng. ■

PARTNERS

HANDA REHABILITATION AND WELFARE ASSOCIATION (HANDA)



HANDA, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in August, is an organization of people affected by leprosy that was registered as an NGO in Guangdong Province, China, in 1996. It works as a branch of IDEA — the International Association for Integration, Dignity and Economic Advancement — with a mission to promote dignity and respect among all human beings, particularly those affected by leprosy.

Since its founding, HANDA has worked to eliminate social discrimination against affected persons and improve their quality of life through social, psychological, physical and economic rehabilitation. Activities include

organizing skills training workshops; providing small loans to help start income-generating projects that lead to economic independence; running a mobile eye unit and comprehensive foot-care project; helping children of affected persons go to school; and mobilizing social resources to improve the basic living conditions of those with leprosy. It also operates HANDA Quilt, a micro enterprise begun in 1997 that exports handicrafts to several countries.

HANDA is now based in Guangzhou and is active in seven provinces in China. It has made rapid progress in its first decade, and will continue to help persons affected by leprosy as it works toward its goal of a world free of discrimination and full of equality.