

Heroes are made, not born

People should stop to help if they see someone in trouble – we are a community and responsible for one another



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You don't need a cape and secret cave made out of Lego bricks to be a hero. A friend of mine saved a life last week.

While dropping off her kids at school, she saw a man lying on the side of the road. On her way back, she stopped to check on him. He wasn't intoxicated. He was severely ill. She called an ambulance while other people in cars drove by.

The baristas at my neighbourhood cafe save a life every day. The coffee house is the regular stop of a special needs adult who enjoys a daily ramble along a familiar route. The baristas watch out for him, give him free drinks, but no cake. His caregivers had told them he is diabetic.

Thinking of these everyday heroes brings a lump to my throat. What brings tears to my eyes is realising that their actions are extraordinary.

Think again of my friend who knelt beside a moaning, trembling man who had fallen next to a busy road. She had been taking her children to school. It was half an hour before she returned to check on him. In those 30 minutes, no other driver stopped to call an ambulance.

Perhaps the drivers thought the fallen man was drunk and therefore undeserving of help. Perhaps they had the eyesight of the average middle-class – or richer – adult, which focuses on smartphone notifications rather than present reality. We don't like being inconvenienced. We have an innate distaste of those who appear odd.

I shared my friend's experience with others. One listener nodded, imagining the cars whizzing by without stopping. A few months ago, his sister fell in a crowded area and severely injured her back. She had to crawl along the pavement to get into a taxi. No passer-by stopped to help her. They stepped over her.

Yes, this was in Singapore. Another listener said of my friend: "I can't believe she went back to him. I wouldn't have gone back."

She isn't a hard-hearted person.

"I would just assume someone else would help him."

Who?
"The police? Civil Defence? It's their job."

Fair point. But the uniformed services can't be everywhere at every time. In case of an emergency, should we wait for so-called first responders or take on that role ourselves?

Earlier this month, The Straits Times named Olympian Joseph Schooling its pick for Singaporean Of The Year 2016. Another heroic young man was among the finalists: Ashvin Gunasegaran, a 12-year-old who rushed to help a woman stuck in her car after it collided with another in Yishun last May. A bunch of adults in the vicinity gawked and took pictures. Ashvin's friends warned him to stay away because the cars were emitting smoke. But he had been taught during a safety lesson in school to help victims of a traffic accident, so he did.

Helpfulness is a learnt response. Genetics drives any living being to actions that ensure its DNA survives into the next generation. Most such actions are selfish.

In other words, heroes are made, not born. In the case of the everyday heroes already mentioned, each has an origin story worthy of a comic book.

My friend came back to check on the man because her brother died in a roadside accident where no one had stopped to help.

The barista who quietly supervises the special needs adult at my neighbourhood cafe was once stationed at a coffee outlet in a hospital. While pulling shots of espresso, he noticed a man slumping to the floor outside the cafe. This was a hospital and yet people rushed around and over the figure for painful minutes. Nothing happened until a doctor came by and realised the man was having a heart attack.

Would you blame the barista for not leaving his station while the orders piled up and the hungry lunchtime queue grew? Would you blame the hospital visitors for not stopping, some on their way to



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worrisome clinical tests, others rushing to see a loved one?

What I know is that the barista's experience now allows him and his colleagues to keep a neighbourly eye on a person who needs their help.

What I know is that when my late grandmother was in hospital for heart surgery, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and a stranger informed me that our neighbour, an elderly bachelor, had collapsed at the office. The stranger, a colleague, had brought our neighbour home, but did not know what to do next.

I didn't know what to do either. I told my father. The second the words left my lips, he rushed out of the door so fast it banged shut. Knowing his mother was ill and wanted to see her family, my father still took the time – half a day, I remember – to ensure our neighbour was seen by a doctor and eventually admitted to hospital.

Everyday heroes have learnt from experience. My family will always stop when it appears someone is in trouble because once

upon a time, my brother was in a traffic accident and a stranger rushed out of his store and took my brother to hospital. It saved his life.

Everyday heroism can and should be taught. School talks about safety and traffic accidents are a great start, as the tale of Ashvin shows.

Another wonderful idea is the Forget Us Not initiative by Lien Foundation and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. It raises awareness of dementia and, more importantly, trains people on how to interact with sufferers of dementia and refer them to aid agencies, if need be.

At last count, one in 10 in Singapore suffers from dementia, which means there are thousands who might need the respectful kindness of strangers at any given moment.

When people need help, we cannot and should not overlook them. Yet, even those who want to help may hesitate for fear of making the situation worse.

If a person has collapsed by the side of the road, should he be touched? If he moves fitfully in the

long minutes before an ambulance arrives – drivers here should make more effort to give way to emergency services – should he be restrained?

Remember those posters around MRT stations explaining that it is more polite to stand when speaking to someone in a wheelchair, rather than hunker down to eye level?

Sensitivity training is useful. We could also use posters with practical information explaining what to do in the event a fellow commuter appears to have a medical emergency.

We could have TV and YouTube advertisements explaining what and what not to do in similar cases, reinforcing the point that we are a community and responsible for one another.

The heroes I know stop to help because they don't see a stranger in need. They see themselves or their loved ones needing succour and so they step in, not step back. Exactly one step makes a hero. Today, that step could be taken by you.

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