WHO WILL CARE FOR QUAN JIN?

LOW Quan Jin, 17, makes waffles at the Professor Brawn Cafe in Novena Square.

He is a student at Pathlight School, which enrolls children with autism aged six to 18. He works for half a day on Fridays at the cafe.

The cafe, set up by Mr Roland Tay, 55, and his wife, MP Denise Phua, 50, is an example of what is known as a supported employment model, under which adults with autism can find paid work, with professional support from an organisation that trains them.

Cafe staff with autism receive prior vocational training in food and beverage services at Pathlight School. They get further training at the cafe by job coaches from Pathlight, who guide non-autistic staff on how to work with them.

Tasks in the kitchen, like making a waffle, are broken down into various steps. Because staff afflicted by the disorder are more receptive to visual cues, their work systems are written down onto cards with pictures to follow.

When training is complete, the autistic staff start to receive a market rate for their services.

Mr Tay says that the enterprise would not work without “crucial” partnerships with organisations or schools like Pathlight.

“If I had to do the training (of staff with autism) myself... it might not work,” the former senior vice-president at Singapore Technologies Telemedia admits. “I don’t have the expertise.”

Ms Phua feels that employers here must “go beyond just having a kind heart”.

“Employers are willing to provide jobs out of the goodness of their hearts to people with special needs. However, unless we are able to make these staff job-ready, with an appropriate level of support depending on the severity of their autism, the employers will not have them for long.”

Since the cafe opened last year, they have trained eight staffs including Quan Jin.

But their stints at the cafe are not permanent.

Mr Tay, the cafe’s chief executive officer, aims to provide them with real-world experience and train them until they are employable outside.

Quan Jin’s mother, Madam Kang Poh Choo, 53, hopes her son will achieve that goal when he graduates from school in a few years’ time.

“I don’t expect employers to pay him on the same scale as normal staff,” Madam Kang, a part-time cleaner, says. “As long as there’s a similar place that will let him work just four or five hours a day, I will be satisfied.”

About his future, she says:

“My dream is to have a place for people with autism to stay and work. Only then will my heart be at peace.”

Professor Brawn Cafe currently takes in students from Pathlight only. But Ms Phua wants this system to be exportable and says the Autism Resource Centre has plans to introduce the cafe’s model to interested employers.

“We need to make it known in Singapore the supported employment model... We also need to build up a pool of job coaches,” she says. “We are prepared to also provide consultancy services to employers... who want to hire them (people with autism).”

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‘You can’t be in it for the money’

The centre, which caters to about 25 clients, sees violent tantrums daily. Teachers like Ms Ng have to bear the brunt of what can sometimes be frightening situations.

“I’ve been punched, hit and scratched,” says the 27-year-old, who was once picked up and thrown against the wall during a student’s violent fit.

“But I have come to understand that throwing tantrums are the only way they know how to express themselves and it is not their fault because they often don’t realise their own strength.”

The challenges mean that many teachers willing to work with people who have autism request to handle children instead, leaving a shortage of personnel in adult services. Unlike other disabilities, autism varies from individual to individual, so teachers need to tailor treatments to each person, which can be demanding.

Teacher-therapists at the centre have to provide anything from basic toilet training to more complex pre-vocational skills depending on the temperament and severity of a person’s condition.

“You might have one person in the group who is very lethargic so you are always having to cajole and motivate him. At the same time, there will be others you have to try to calm down and settle,” says Dr Jill Taylor, director of client services at the St Andrew’s Autism Centre.

“You need to constantly analyse what is going on and it can be extremely exhausting because you cannot actually be yourself all through the day.”

Those who do work with adults also often face issues with job satisfaction.

“Because they are adults, their learning pace is slower and it can be demoralising for teachers when they feel like their charges are not making any progress,” says Dr Taylor.

Ms Ng agrees: “It was frustrating initially when I did not see results despite the effort I was putting in. I had to learn to understand that they are not limited and lower my expectations.”

As a result, most in the profession stay out of passion for the job.

Ms K. Yeo, 25, a behavioural therapist at a private special education centre in Singapore, has been working in the field since she graduated from university three years ago.

“This job is definitely something you have to be passionate about. You cannot be doing it for the money,” says Ms Yeo who works exclusively with children who have autism.

Mr Melvin Maramot, the former programme coordinator and now head of therapy services at St Andrew’s, has been working in special education for 11 years. He gives the reason that he stays: “There is a dire need for service provision for youth and adults with autism.”

“We need to cultivate the sensitivity and compassion towards these individuals, to help preserve their right to a meaningful life.”

Teachers need passion to face a demanding and often thankless job

EVEN if care facilities had more room to treat adults who have autism, there are still not enough teachers and therapists willing to take on the demanding work.

“Due to the complexity of the disorder, working with these individuals can be very physically demanding,” says Ms Ng Yan Jin, one of about five teacher-therapists at the St Andrew’s Day Activity Centre.