SINGAPORE

Seniors turn active ageing centre into a circus stage

The acts offer blend of physical challenge, mental focus and social connection

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Part-time lecturer Kwan Pak Kean (far left) and insurance agent Darren Tan (at right) practising with the diabolo, with other members of the Senior Gentlemen's Circus at Goodlife Studio (Telok Blangah Towers) on Aug 7. Ten of them have been picking up circus acts since June as they gear up for their debut performance on Aug 24.
ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

A group of senior men gathered at the Goodlife Studio (Telok Blangah Towers) on Aug 7, transforming the active ageing centre (AAC) into a circus stage.

Some were learning diabolo tricks, while others were juggling balls. Ten seniors from the Senior Gentlemen's Circus have been picking up circus acts since June as they gear up for their debut performance on Aug 24 at Mount Faber with the Telok Blangah Community Club.

It is one of the ways the AAC is engaging elderly men and keeping them active. The training is held once a week for a total of 12 sessions.

Mr Kwan Pak Kean, 67, a part-time lecturer at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, said that at first, it seemed difficult manipulating the diabolo – an hourglass-shaped object that is manipulated by string like a yo-yo – but the "fun factor" kept him going.

"I haven't fully mastered the advanced tricks, but I have learnt enough to impress and train my three grandchildren," he said.

Insurance agent Darren Tan said he joined the circus due to the "novelty effect" but kept dropping the diabolo initially.

"It took me two lessons to get the hang of it, and I have been coming to the centre to practise on top of the lessons," said the 62-year-old bachelor.

"It has helped to improve my coordination and concentration."

Mr Lee Poh Wah, the chief executive of Lien Foundation, which brought the programme to the AAC, said circus acts offer a rich blend of physical challenge, mental focus and social connection.

"Senior men continue to remain on the margins of our social care and preventative healthcare system," he told The Straits Times.

"Through our various programmes, we see that senior men respond better to activities that tap past passions, rekindling youthful energy and inviting them back into the centre of community life."

The philanthropic organisation has commissioned other activities like magic, rock climbing, e-sports, a music band and the yo-yo as part of its Seniors Go! programmes, which have allowed seniors since 2022 to explore activities rarely associated with ageing.

In 2024, the Lien Foundation supported the Silver Pride Lion Troupe, Singapore's first senior lion dance troupe, at Fei Yue Active Ageing Centre (Holland Close).

The troupe was awarded the President's Design Award 2025's Design Of The Year.

The foundation also pioneered Gym Tonic in 2015, which focuses on strength training for seniors. There are currently 29 sites serving about 5,200 users annually.

They range from 55 to 97 years old, with an average age of 71 for women and 73 for men.

Mr Jay Che, the principal instructor of Circus in Motion, said this is the first time he is running a workshop for seniors with no prior experience in circus acts.

He and his team have curated acts that are low impact for seniors, including juggling, diabolo, plate spinning and the poi.

"These activities have also been shown to induce changes in brain structure by increasing grey matter in areas linked to visual motion processing and sensory-motor integration," he said.

The seniors' circus coach, Mr Edward Chua, said one of the challenges the elderly face would be the fear of getting injured.

"Seniors may hold back, concerned about hitting themselves or strains, especially during more complex tricks with the diabolo," he said. Another challenge would be their mental focus.

"Juggling may demand quick thinking and multitasking, which are skills that become harder with age," he said. "Seniors must focus on multiple objects in motion and process visual cues at a fast pace, which can be quite taxing."

Ms Ang Ying Xuan, senior programme executive at Goodlife Studio (Telok Blangah Towers), said it is heartening to see new friendships form among the "uncles" who have joined the circus.

"They often hang out after class for a coffee or a game of chess, and that's something we are really glad to see," she said.

The centre will monitor their qualitative and quantitative improvements before and after the circus programme. This involves checking for improvements in their balance and memory.

It is also exploring forming an interest group that can guide other seniors to learn the circus acts.

Besides the circus, the AAC also organises a weekly Gentlemen's Brew event that sees senior men gather over coffee and tea at the centre.

The proportion of male seniors at the centre has increased from 14 per cent in April to 24 per cent, or 54 men. There are 226 active seniors, and the current ratio is around one man to four women.

"Many of our programmes tend to attract more female participants, which can sometimes make the male seniors hesitant to join, especially for activities with a strong social element," Ms Ang said. "Some of the uncles may feel less comfortable mingling in larger mixed-gender groups, which is why we're always exploring ways to create more male-friendly spaces and activities that feel welcoming and relevant to them."

The Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) told ST that one in three seniors engaged across all AACs is male.

Many AACs are organising male-centric activities to engage male seniors.

For example, NTUC Health AACs run various physical and social male-exclusive programmes to address social isolation among elderly men. Male seniors gather weekly for Let's Lim Kopi to trade stories and connect with one another over coffee and snacks, while Let's Steel Combat engages male participants in simple martial arts.

Let's Go Man!, a collaboration between Touch Community Services and Ngee Ann Polytechnic, organises activities such as memory games and walking soccer for male seniors to promote physical, cognitive and social well-being.

At Allkin's AAC in Pasir Ris, the Men's Club is a senior-led group where male seniors take charge – planning and running their own activities, from cycling to chess to even repair work.

Many also volunteer to accompany frail or less mobile neighbours so they can participate too.

This ground-up model has since expanded to two AACs in Ang Mo Kio, with over 70 members and tailored activities at each location.

Besides joining the circus, Mr Kwan will be participating in a water-colouring class at Goodlife Studio (Telok Blangah Towers).

Mr Tan, who is active at two AACs currently, said he has been attending health and digital talks.

"I hope to go on more outings around Singapore," he said. "Staying at home all the time is bad for health."

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