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HAPPIER TIMES: Madam Susan Chee and her late husband, Mr Tan Choon Yeow, in an old family photo.



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— Madam Susan Chee, who works for the Wicare Support Group

Helping others to heal

Widow of 1997 SilkAir crash victim still feels the pain, works with group to help others cope

Report by **TAN TAM MEI**
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Sixteen years have passed since her husband died in a plane crash.

But the tears continue to flow.

Madam Susan Chee, who lost her husband in the Dec 19, 1997 SilkAir Flight M1185 crash, said: "I don't know when the crying will stop. But I believe that there was love and there was a marriage. So I don't think I will or can forget the feelings that we had."

"I think about my husband every day. But I'm so blessed that I can have a full day (of activities) where I can sleep immediately and not harp on my emotions."

Part of her life now is to help other widows and the fatherless cope. For the past year, Madam Chee has been working for the Wicare Support Group, a voluntary welfare organisation (VWO) registered in 1998.

Madam Chee, 56, runs its office in Bishan as general manager. The VWO is run by a committee and its volunteers are mostly widows. Wicare also organises talks on issues such as widowhood, single-parenting and remarriage.

Madam Chee said: "Being widows ourselves, we know how it feels to have this gaping wound that cannot be seen. Being part of Wicare gives me confidence that I am not alone."

Sixteen years ago, she felt alone and lost when the plane her husband was in crashed into the Musi River, off Palembang, Indonesia, killing all 104 on board. Mr Tan Choon Yeow, 46, was an accountant.

"On the 19th of December, my life stopped. And I picked up the pieces from there. I believe that that was the night that changed my life."

Even now, she is reminded of the loss of her "soulmate".

"The part of the day (when you are reminded most about losing your husband) is at night, when you come back home. He's not coming back. You can't wait for him to have dinner. New years, birthdays and Christmases are no longer fun."

She said: "I miss my husband most during parent-teachers meetings... "And sometimes even at restaurants, when you see other whole families having dinner.

When I visit my mother-in-law over Chinese New Year and I see my brothers-in-law; they have the same mannerisms, so that reminds me of him."

Being a single mother has not been easy. Her two daughters were aged one and five, and her son aged six, at the time of the plane crash.

Madam Chee admitted to becoming a "tiger mum" and was strict with her children because she felt the need to fill the father figure role in their lives.

"I think my children didn't have an outlet – a father to go to 'manja' (Malay word for pamper) them. Especially my two girls. They had no one (else to turn to)."

'THERE IS A VACUUM'

Madam Chee said the death of a spouse is different from the death of another family member.

"Losing your husband is like losing half of yourself. There is a vacuum. Whereas losing a mum, of course you are very sad..."

"But when you lose a husband, you lose your other half, someone you have chosen to spend the rest of your life with."

She credits her faith for giving her the emotional support she needed through the grieving process.

Being involved with Wicare has helped Madam Chee deal with her loss and grief. She describes herself as "guo lu ren" (a Chinese phrase for someone who has been through "it") and she wants to give back and help others who face the same loss and grief.

"It encourages me that even in my loss, I can help others... I need to help others, because I have experienced it myself."

— Miss Tan Tam Mei is the eldest daughter of Madam Susan Chee. She is a third-year student majoring in journalism at Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and did this story as part of her photojournalism class.



KEEPING BUSY: (Above) Madam Susan Chee locking up the Wicare office where she is general manager. (Below) Madam Chee celebrating the 17th birthday of her youngest daughter, Jo Ee. PHOTOS: TAN TAM MEI

