

MY THOUGHTS

Spare a thought
for the 'aunty'
serving you

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

SOME weeks ago, I headed for dinner at the dining hall in University Town at the National University of Singapore (NUS). As usual, I went to the counter where I would be provided my meal, and I was ready to mutter my thanks to the server and leave.

But then I noticed that the server, who was probably in her 50s, had tears flowing down her face. It was obvious that she was emotional, but was attempting to conceal it. I had seen her before: Every evening, she would cheerfully pass me my dinner, but this time, she was evidently distraught.

It was a difficult situation. While I wanted to ask her what was wrong, I simply didn't know her well enough to say very much. If I asked her questions, she might think that I was being intrusive, or worse, patronising. But if I didn't say anything, I would feel guilty that I blithely disregarded her feelings.

This encounter led me to think about societal attitudes to service staff around us. How often do young Singaporeans ignore the presence of the unsung heroes who serve us in so many small ways? Think of the cleaners who clear the tables at canteens, the bus drivers who ferry us from place to place, and the food vendors who prepare our favourite dishes.

It actually doesn't take very much for us to show them our appreciation. A simple "thank you" and a smile often suffice.



It doesn't take very much to show our appreciation to service staff such as cleaners and bus drivers. A simple "thank you" and a smile often suffice. ST FILE PHOTO

Yet I have seen young people at fast-food outlets routinely taking cleaners for granted, leaving behind piles of rubbish to be cleared, and offering no word of thanks.

Such behaviour persists, even though, as an American friend remarked, Singaporeans seem to refer to service staff as personal relatives – we address service staff as "aunties" and "uncles", indicating a certain level of familiarity and informality. If we really regard service staff as relatives shouldn't we show them greater respect and gratitude?

Fortunately, there are young people today who recognise this problem. At NUS, a group of students has organised an initiative called "Project: Gratitude", which aims to encourage acts of kindness towards service staff on campus. Through activities such as an art exhibition, the organisers seek to foster a culture of gratitude in the campus community.

Such an initiative is commendable. It demonstrates how some young Singapore-

ans recognise that all members of society, regardless of their socio-economic background, deserve care and respect. It also raises our awareness that service staff should be appreciated as individuals who are more than just their occupations.

The server who was in tears was a person with hopes and fears, expectations and disappointments, and a whole history of experiences that I knew nothing about.

Maybe she had children – had something happened to them? Or did she have a husband – might he be ill? Yet she did not need to be asked these questions. She needed some genuine, heartfelt concern.

At the dining hall, I paused and quietly said to her in Mandarin: "Aunty, I hope everything will be all right for you. Do let me know if I can do anything to help."

She was momentarily stunned. But then she looked at me, gave a gentle smile, and whispered: "Thank you."

The writer, 23, is a third-year English Literature major at NUS.