

## WHAT'S UP

### Migrant workers who write poetry

*A poetry competition gives migrant workers in Singapore a chance to share their hopes, fears, and dreams. CLARA LOCK finds out more.*



Indonesian Deni Apriyani (holding trophy) won first prize at last year's Migrant Worker Poetry Competition. She is pictured here with the competition judges.

[Photo: China Global Television Network]

Deni Apriyani is a domestic helper who cooks and cleans for a family in Singapore. But, she is also a writer and poet who won first prize at last year's Migrant Worker Poetry Competition.

Five years ago, Ms Apriyani came to Singapore from Indramayu, Indonesia, to work and earn money for her family. It was her first time in a big city, and Ms Apriyani was afraid and lonely.

"My employers... I was scared like how are they going to treat me. Are they going to treat me well or badly?" she said.

Writing helped her cope with these fears. Ms Apriyani wrote poems and funny stories to make herself laugh. The 28-year-old has been doing that since she was a teenager.

When Ms Apriyani was younger, she wanted to be a teacher, librarian, or news reporter. But, she had to stop studying as her family could not afford the fees for senior high school.

## Working abroad

There are many migrant workers like Ms Apriyani around the world. Migrant workers are people who leave their homes and families to earn a living in a different country. In Singapore, there were about 965,000 migrant workers in 2017. They made up about 17 per cent of the population.

Migrant workers often do physically challenging jobs that locals do not want. For instance, men do construction work such as building roads, homes, shopping malls, and MRT stations. Women work as domestic helpers, living with their employers' families to cook, clean, and take care of young children.

With the money they send home, migrant workers help their families afford a better life. They can pay for their basic needs, and children's schooling. Some families even start small businesses back home.

But, for the migrant workers, it can be difficult working abroad. Employers may demand long hours and not allow the workers to rest. If workers are sick or injured and cannot work, they may not be paid when absent.

On top of that, migrant workers often miss their families very much. They can only go home to see their children, elderly parents, other family members, and friends every one or two years.

## Poetry competition

The Migrant Worker Poetry Competition gives these workers a chance to tell their stories, and have Singaporeans listen. The competition was started in 2014 by author Shivaji Das. Mr Das was doing volunteer work when he met a group of workers who regularly wrote and shared poetry. This gave him the idea to have a contest for them.

Mr Das wanted to show Singaporeans that migrant workers are people, not just workers. He said, "When (migrant workers) see their work being **showcased**... they feel that the wider society appreciates their contributions, and also appreciates the quality of their creative work."

Over the years, more people from different countries have joined the annual competition. Last year, there were 107 participants of eight nationalities, writing poems in 10 languages.

## Sharing stories

Ms Apriyani's winning entry, called "Further Away", is about an abusive marriage. It was a story she heard from a woman in her hometown, whose husband beat her.

"She told me her story while crying. I don't know her name. I don't know where she is now, is she alive or not. She was saying, 'I have a husband who's not good at all. He hits me and, we're not happy with our relationship but I stay with him....' She says she loves him. This lady, even though she's being abused and being hurt, her heart is still so pure. I feel like this story needs to be told because hands and legs are not supposed to speak," said Ms Apriyani.

As first place winner, Ms Apriyani took home \$500. Her dream is to save enough money to return home and help her father start his own farm.

When that day comes, she will leave with good memories of her time in Singapore, and she hopes Singaporeans will feel the same way about migrant workers like her.

Ms Apriyani said, “We are all just the same. We are human beings. We have feelings, we have jokes. And, I hope (Singaporeans) understand that we are here to work. ... and I just hope everyone is being friendly towards migrant workers.”

### VOCAB BUILDER

**showcased** (say “**show-keisd**”; verb) = showed the best qualities of something.

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