



Hello, neighbours!

A photographer creates an album to open doors of friendship.



PHOTOGRAPHER Sam Kang Li (seated, with his family) 📍 has had adventures in Nepal, China and other countries, but also found a meaningful project in his own HDB block. Starting with his own family, he shot portraits of the residents, helping to bring them closer.

Block 230G along Tampines Street 21 is probably the only HDB block in Singapore with a photo album of its residents.

Photographer Sam Kang Li began creating a set of portraits of his neighbours two years ago, when he finished his university studies. He was curious about the people living in the same block as him. Despite being a resident since 1993, he barely recognised anybody staying in his block of 44 flats.

He was also interested in cultivating a community spirit among his neighbours, just like what he had seen in the kampungs his parents had grown up in Malaysia.

To get his neighbours to open their doors to him, Mr Sam turned to photography. He began knocking on their doors, asking if he could take their **portrait**.

Explaining his project to the newspaper *My Paper*, he said, “Before we can have all the talk about a ‘kampung spirit’, you have to get to know one another first. And, really, the most direct way is to knock on the doors of people and introduce yourself.”

He titled his project, “At Our Doorsteps”. To convince his neighbours to participate in the project, Mr Sam set an example by taking a portrait of his family at their doorstep. He knocked on doors over many evenings and weekends. When his neighbours opened their doors, Mr Sam introduced himself and his project. Then, he usually snapped the portraits of his neighbours at their doorsteps. This was so that he could put faces to the unit numbers and closed doors that he usually saw. It was also a simple method that did not take up too much of his neighbours’ time.

In May, he finally put together the 37 portraits he had shot into an album. He organised a photo exhibition cum block party for his neighbours. This was the first time the residents saw the portraits as a block. Each household was also presented with a large framed portrait of its members and an “album” of Block 230G’s residents.

“One lady went around with my book to get autographs of every household, declaring: ‘My book is the most valuable because I have all the signatures!’ That left quite a nice feeling in me. That’s exactly what I want the photos to do, to be a catalyst for people to start interacting with each other,” says the 28-year-old.

Their Member of Parliament, Mah Bow Tan, was so impressed with the project that he came for the block party and paid tribute to Mr Sam’s effort. Mr Mah pointed out that even though the government runs community centres and other programmes to build neighbourliness, efforts by ordinary citizens were extremely important as well.



[Photo: Sam Kang Li]

Through this project, Mr Sam learnt more about his neighbours. He found that some of the strangers actually had connections to his own family. One of his neighbours used to play in his house as a child because his mum looked after her cousin more than 10 years ago. He also found his sister's teacher from junior college.

Most importantly, he realised his neighbours were friendly. It did not take more than a simple hello to get people to open up. Although not everyone wanted to be photographed for his project, Mr Sam says they should not be seen as less neighbourly. Some might be shy and reclusive by nature or have some good reasons to keep to themselves.

Mr Sam says that since the block party, his neighbours come up to him more often just to talk. Getting to know his neighbours is just the beginning of building a sense of community amongst the residents. He says, "I think with this project, a seed has been planted. But we need to keep watering the seed for it to blossom into a flower."

– By *JUSTIN ZHUANG*

VOCABULARY

portrait (say "paw-tret"; noun.) = A photo, drawing or painting of a person or group. If you make a portrait of yourself, it is called a "self-portrait".

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