

REMEMBERING FONG SIEW YIN

by *Sudha Nair*

Fong Siew Yin, 54 is finally at peace. She died at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in the wee hours of this morning, August 24 2017. Siew Yin is not just a name. She was a daughter, a sister to three siblings, and a mother to two children. To me, Siew Yin was a long-time client and I would add, a friend.

Siew Yin was the victim of perhaps the most brutal intimate partner violence that Singapore has ever seen. Old photographs show an attractive woman with long hair and a vivacious look. But the Siew Yin I first met in 2000 was emaciated, undernourished, blind, toothless, with numerous severe injuries. She was nothing like the woman in the photographs.

Siew Yin had been battered repeatedly by the man she loved and lived with but never married, and he was the father of her children, a daughter and a son. Her injuries showed she suffered the most horrific pain for six years of her life. Her partner was dealt with for what he did to Siew Yin, but he never stopped looking for her, and she had to spend several years in a shelter to stay safe.

Her injuries eventually led to total blindness and permanent disability. Sometime in June 2016, her condition deteriorated and she was left bed-bound, needed to be tube-fed and she was non – communicative. She eventually died of pneumonia.

Siew Yin had two sides to her character. She had a great sense of humour, and was very child-like in her behaviour. She loved everything Indian – mee goreng, hot curries and nasi briyani, as well as milk chocolates and Danish butter cookies. She was a forgiving woman. Despite the brutality she had suffered, she never once asked “Why Me?”. She loved her children deeply and was so proud of the fact that they were bright and graduated from tertiary institutions.

Siew Yin could also be difficult and stubborn. She sometimes wanted her own way. She had an encyclopedia of expletives which she used quite readily when she was angry with me.

Her lifetime of suffering has ended. But her life and her death must teach us some lessons.

First, how could this have happened in modern day Singapore? Siew Yin was tortured for six years while living in a three-room Housing Board flat. How could the neighbours not have known? How could they not have heard or seen enough to tell them that something bad was happening in that flat? Siew Yin was a young woman with two small children through that time. It took six years before help finally came.

Second, how do we protect women in a live-in relationship? There is no protection for them in the Women's Charter, which provides for married women only. Yet we know that many people are in live-in relationships. At PAVE we deal with women battered by their boyfriends. A 20-year-old woman was murdered by her boyfriend in Banda Street last year; in 2015, a 23 year old was beaten so severely by her boyfriend that it damaged her vocal cords . After the beating her left her battered along a roadside. How many more tragic cases do we need before the law is changed to protect ALL people in an intimate partner relationship, men and women alike? Everyone deserves protection, not only those who are legally married

I saw Siew Yin regularly over the last 17 years. I am sad to lose this friend, and sad that her children have lost their mother at the relatively young age of 54. But I am also relieved that Siew Yin's pain and suffering have finally ended. I hope her life and death will not be in vain, and that in time, our laws will be changed to extend help to everyone who needs it. I hope people who are aware or suspect violence in the flat next door will sound the alert sooner and not tell themselves it's a private matter, a family dispute. I hope that all of us who are helping professionals continue to do the best we can to help the children from these families to live a decent, violence-free life.

Be at peace Siew Yin.