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Generation Grit

## Generation Grit: Once homeless, she now helps others

Ms Zulayqha Zulkifli, 24, is a child of divorce. After her parents separated, her mother suffered a stroke and later left her and her siblings. Her father struggled to support the family. Despite the difficulties, Ms Zulayqha never gave up hope.

While she was homeless and forced to sleep at the void deck, Zulayqha Zulkifli never once gave up hope of a better life for her family. With the support of those around her, she made it through all the hardships, and is now dedicated to helping others as a social work associate and grassroots volunteer. This is her story, in a series by The Straits Times about inspiring millennials.

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In less than a year, Ms Zulayqha Zulkifli, 24, went from a normal existence, living with her family in their four-room flat in Henderson Crescent, to sleeping rough in the void deck with her mother and three siblings.

In 2010, her parents went through a messy divorce, which came "out of the blue", said Ms Zulayqha, then a Secondary 4 student at CHIJ St Theresa's Convent.

That year, her father lost his job as a technician - so when her parents sold their marital flat a year later, the whole family scrambled to find accommodation as they had little means to support themselves.

The children and their mother eventually went to live with a relative, but tensions between the two families meant Ms Zulayqha and her siblings often found themselves sleeping at the stone tables in the void deck instead.

"We took turns to stay awake to keep each other safe," said Ms Zulayqha. She has a younger brother and sister, aged 22 and 23, and an older brother, who is 26.

Somehow, they took the hardship in their stride. "We didn't have much time to be sad or pity ourselves," said Ms Zulayqha. "Life went on. We were just trying to survive each day."

Eventually they found a roof over their heads in the form of an interim Housing Board four-room flat in Sims Drive, while waiting for a rental unit.

But there was yet another twist to their lives two years ago. One day, the siblings returned home from school to find that their mother, who had an administrative job in a hospital, had packed her belongings and left them - without so much as an explanation. Ms Zulayqha was 22, and in her final year at Nanyang Polytechnic.

They found out a week later that their mother had suffered a stroke a few days prior to her disappearance, and had left so she could recuperate on her own. Even after knowing why she had gone, Ms Zulayqha was upset that they had been left with the mounting bills. All four siblings were still students then.

## MAKING TIME FOR OTHERS

**We like to think that we are very unfortunate to be in our situation, but it's only through volunteering and helping others that I realise there are so many others out there who are in worse situations.**

MS ZULAYQHA ZULKIFLI, noting that her experience has fuelled her desire to help those in need.

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## STAYING POSITIVE

**Perseverance is a very important value that you have to acquire. Through perseverance, we are able to get through all the challenging obstacles ahead of us. It can be demoralising, having to wait for things to get better. But we should grit our teeth, move forward with a positive mindset, and just keep counting the blessings and achievements we have attained every day.**

MS ZULAYQHA, on not giving up.

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## HELPING WITH SINCERITY

**A defining quality about Zulayqha is her sincerity to help others. She would say: 'Just because we are not in a good situation, doesn't mean it's an excuse to not do something good for others.'**

MR ZULHAQEM ZULKIFLI, on his sister Zulayqha.

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"We'd been through so much together and we thought that we'd always have each other's backs," she said.

For two weeks, they held out hope that their mother would return. But it was so hard on their own, having to worry about paying for their daily needs and the household bills, that they considered asking to be admitted to a children's home. "But as much I wanted to be angry, I kept thinking that I'd gone through so much hardship already, why should I give up now?" she said.

Eventually, they went to their father for help, and he agreed to support them on his salary as a cleaner. He moved with them to the interim HDB flat. Slowly they managed to pay off their debts, which included utilities and the rent.

Ms Zulayqha also found herself taking on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings.

But then, she has always been self-reliant.

After scoring straight As in her N-level exams, she entered the Institute of Technical Education where she again scored straight As and was awarded the Howe Yoon Chong PSA Scholarship.

At Nanyang Polytechnic, she was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship to Encourage Upgrading while studying for her diploma in social sciences (social work).

Ms Zulayqha shared her polytechnic scholarship monthly allowance of \$300 with her siblings, stretching it to pay for groceries and other necessities.

Meanwhile, her mother was living with Ms Zulayqha's maternal grandmother, before moving to another rental flat.

Looking back, Ms Zulayqha said they managed to pull through the difficult times because she and her siblings had each other. The four of them would often joke about their tough situation together.

"We don't say, 'I love you' but we'd talk and tell ourselves to just let things be, we have our lives to live," said Ms Zulayqha.

"My older brother would remind me not to dwell on the negative but to move forward and look on the brighter side of life."

At school, too, she found support from her teachers, many of them former social workers, who would point her to the government agencies that could give her help.

A devout Muslim, Ms Zulayqha also found comfort in her faith.

"There's a verse that says that God will not test his people beyond what they cannot bear. I've always been very motivated by that verse.



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"Every time I feel upset or down, I'll remind myself of it and I'll know that I'm stronger than I think," said Ms Zulayqha.

After all that she has been through, helping others has become her calling, she said.

She is a social work associate with the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore, and is also studying part-time for a bachelor's degree in social work at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Since she started drawing a salary, life has been much better for her and her family, she said.

Her siblings, too, are doing well. Her older brother is in his final year at Nanyang Technological University, while her younger brother is a chef's associate at a restaurant.

Her younger sister works for security firm Certis Cisco, and is living with their mother, while Ms Zulayqha, her brothers and their father live in a two-room rental flat in Mei Ling Street.

Ms Zulayqha dreams of one day moving to a four-room flat with all her siblings and their dad.

Meanwhile, she is a volunteer with various groups, including the People's Association and the Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM), helping out with grassroots events or serving the needy.

"We like to think that we are very unfortunate to be in our situation, but it's only through volunteering and helping others that I realise there are so many others out there who are in worse situations," she mused, noting that her experience has fuelled her desire to help those in need.

Ms Zulayqha's older brother said she has been passionate and sincere about helping others since she was young.

"A defining quality about Zulayqha is her sincerity to help others," said Mr Zulhaqem Zulkifli.

"She would say: 'Just because we are not in a good situation doesn't mean it's an excuse to not do something good for others'."

While she has had many trying periods in her life, Ms Zulayqha said the key to getting through it all is to simply persevere and never give up.

"Perseverance is a very important value that you have to acquire. Through perseverance, we are able to get through all the challenging obstacles ahead of us.

"It can be demoralising, having to wait for things to get better. But we should grit our teeth, move forward with a positive mindset, and just keep counting the blessings and achievements we have attained every day."

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## **GENERATION GRIT**

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