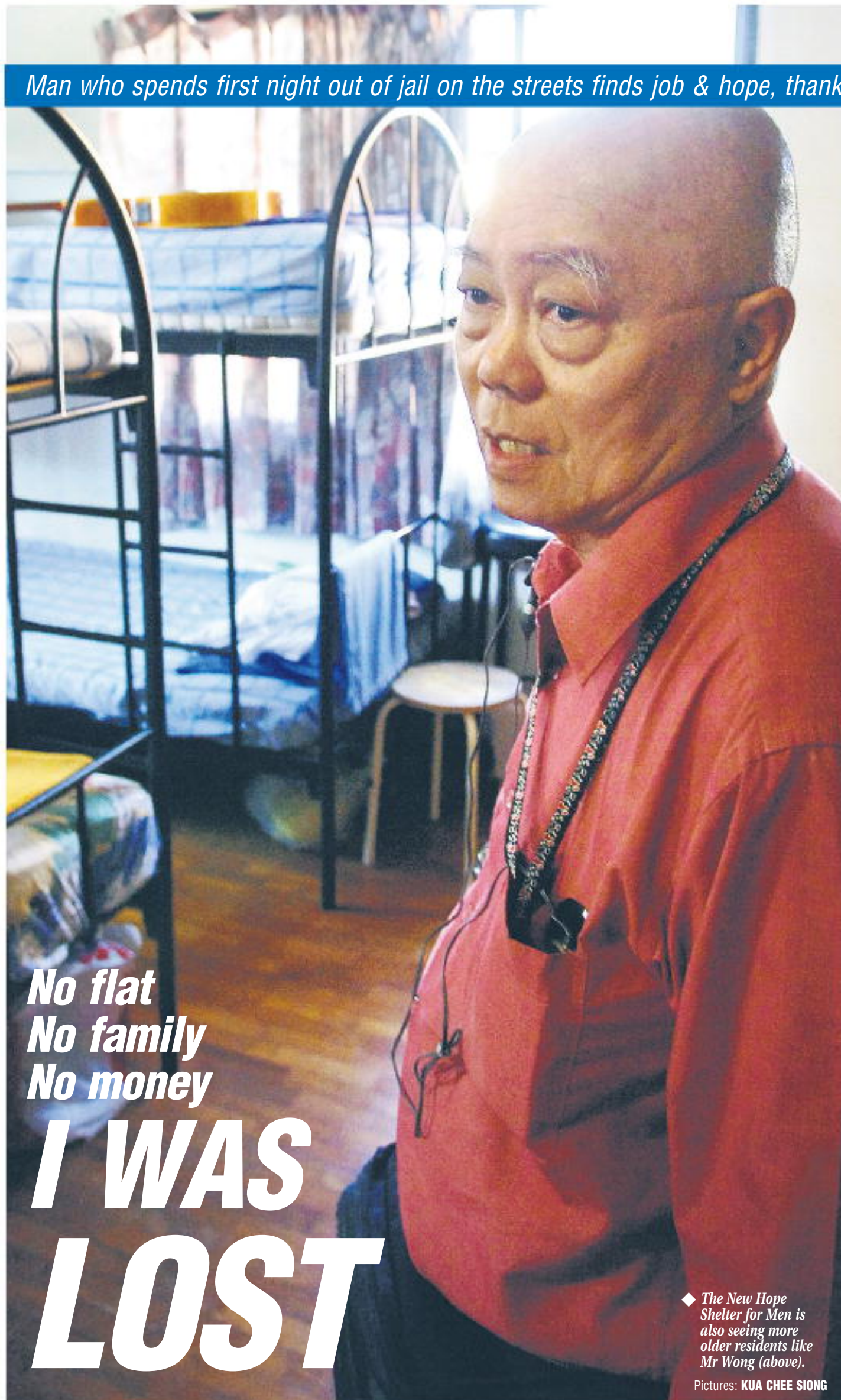


Man who spends first night out of jail on the streets finds job & hope, thanks to shelter



No flat
No family
No money
I WAS LOST

◆ The New Hope Shelter for Men is also seeing more older residents like Mr Wong (above).
Pictures: KUA CHEE SIONG

By Genevieve Jiang
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THE day he was released from jail, he found himself homeless and without loved ones to return to. Mr Benjamin Wong, 66, went to look for his girlfriend of 18 years, and found that she and her grown-up son had moved out of their four-room flat in Simei. They left no contact details. He turned to friends and relatives, but faced only closed doors. With just \$28 in his pocket, he spent the night alone on the streets, sleeping on a pavement in Marine Parade. That was in October last year. The old man, who was a taxi driver before he was jailed, recalled: "I've never felt more alone and pathetic. I had no family, no money, no roof over my head. I was lost." He had been living with his girlfriend before he went to jail. Fortunately, he had help from the welfare group for ex-convicts, the Singapore After-Care Association (Saca), which referred him to a halfway house in Geylang for recovering drug addicts. He was later referred to the New Hope Shelter for Men, where he is still staying today. Housed in a double-storey bungalow in Sembawang, the shelter, which was set up in 2004, is the only one here that provides homeless men with a temporary home. Most are either ex-convicts or those who face family and financial problems. They usually stay for up to six months, but New Hope's executive director, Pastor Andrew Khoo, said there are now men who stay for as long as a year.

THREATENED LOVER'S SON

The shelter is also seeing more elderly residents like Mr Wong, Pastor Khoo added. (See report on facing page.) Last July, Mr Wong was jailed four months for threatening his girlfriend's son with a cleaver. His wife left him in 1989 and she lives with their son and daughter, now in their 30s. Mr Wong then cohabited with another woman for the next 18 years, but he couldn't get along with his girlfriend's son, now 28. He claimed: "He never respected me. He was always rude and talked back to me although we lived under the same roof for 18 years." The pair's tumultuous relationship came to a head last July when the son tried to chase him out of the house. The argument led to a brawl and the police were called in. Mr Wong was arrested and eventually charged.

While he was in jail, he received a letter from his girlfriend - a copy of which was shown to The New Paper - telling him that she no longer wanted anything to do with him.

Upon his release from prison, he found out that they had already moved out of their flat. Mr Wong said: "At the time, I had nothing to my name except the clothes on my back and \$28 in my pocket. He claimed: "I had left all my belongings in the flat, but they were all gone." That is why he is thankful that the shelter has given him a "new life". He has started work as a taxi driver again, and is waiting to share a Housing Board rental flat with other residents at the home. He earns up to \$1,500 a month and has managed to put away some savings.

WEPT UNCONTROLLABLY

Now he is trying to get in touch with his own children, whom he has not seen for almost 18 years. Eyes brimming with tears, he recalled: "The last time I saw my children, they were only teenagers. They came to my home then and tried to reconcile with me, but I turned them away. The meeting ended in an argument with my son, and my daughter was in tears." As he spoke about his children, he wept uncontrollably. Mr Wong, who has high blood pressure and diabetes, was diagnosed with prostate cancer last May. He has been seeking treatment at the Changi General Hospital since his release. Last Christmas, he managed to find out through contacts where his daughter worked, but could not muster the courage to meet her. Instead, he left her a voicemail. She never replied. He said: "I'm an old and dying man. It is my one regret that I disappeared from my children's lives, and left them hurt and in tears. I'm not asking them to forgive me or even to acknowledge me as their father. I just hope to see them. He added: "If I ever get to see my daughter again, I just want to tell her I'm sorry, and that I love her very much. That is my only wish."



◆ A new arrival being shown his bed at the shelter on his first day.

Shelter not meant to be escape plan

SIX homeless drug abusers were the first residents of the shelter. Pastor Andrew Khoo housed them in a single-storey bungalow at Sembawang that the New Hope Community Services had rented. That was in 2003. He said: "Word spread and I soon got more news of men who ended up sleeping on the streets after they were released from jail." In 2004, the New Hope Shelter for Men was officially formed. The shelter's capacity was 18, but it took in about 60 residents every year. This April, they moved to a two-storey bungalow nearby, which can house up to 40 men. There are 23 residents now. Pastor Khoo said: "We didn't want the shelter to turn into an easy long-term escape plan, or into a nursing home. Our aim was to provide temporary housing until the men could find jobs and a place of their own." But now, six men have stayed for more than six months, with one staying close to a year. Pastor Khoo said: "When people are down and out and can't find jobs, how can we turn them away?" One such example is the shelter's oldest resident, John (not his real name). The 69-year-old was jailed for more than 20 years. He declined to reveal his offence. Divorced in 2000, the father of two sons (in their 20s) was referred to the shelter after his release last month. The ex-gardener is unemployed, and one of the few who are not paying for their stay at the shelter. The residents pay \$120 a month. Pastor Khoo said: "We make them pay so that they will not take things for granted that everything here is for free. We are here to help those who help themselves."

Rules are stringent. The gates are locked by midnight. Smoking is not allowed, and anyone found with drugs will be expelled immediately. Household chores are shared. New residents are expected to attend a life skills programme twice a month where they are taught budgeting and anger management. They must also attend counselling by a social worker every month. So far, only one resident has been expelled because he had refused to pay or look for a job. It takes \$150,000 to run the shelter every year, with part of its funding coming from the National Council of Social Service. New Hope Community Services held a walkathon on Saturday to raise \$100,000, but has raised only \$40,000 so far. ◆ For more information or to donate, call 6755 5560.

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