

# Wrap it up for charity

Singaporeans are asking for charity donations in lieu of presents for their birthdays



Natasha Ann Zachariah



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PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAN WAI JIA

While Jonathan Tan (left) is raising money to help chronically and terminally ill children at Club Rainbow for his 21st birthday, Dr Tan Wai Jia (above) asked for items that an African orphanage needed at her party and went to Mozambique, Africa, in April to help sick children.

"It's always initiated by the birthday person himself because he feels he is already very blessed in life and doesn't need anything more."

MS LYNETTE LIM, head of communications of World Vision Singapore, on people raising money with birthday requests for donations

Turning 21 is often synonymous with a big birthday bash, a long guest list and, of course, many presents.

But Jonathan Tan is doing away with all that and celebrating his coming of age next month with a charity fund-raiser.

For the past month, he has been canvassing his friends and family through Facebook and by e-mail to donate to 21 For A Good Cause – his own fund-raising effort.

Mr Tan, who is an event planner, has asked each person to give \$21 – to represent his age – to Club Rainbow, a local charity that helps kids and youth with chronic or terminal illnesses.

"Twenty-first birthday parties are often grand affairs but it's only one day," he says. "I want to do something that, even though may not be big, will help other people."

Other Singaporeans are also holding charity birthday dos, with donations in lieu of presents.

Charity organisations such as online portal GIVE.sg, which is a fund-raising platform that allows individuals to raise funds for their favourite charities, and World Vision Singapore, the local branch of an international organisation that helps fight poverty, say they have seen more people raise money with birthday requests for donations.

In the past year, the charities have seen about 10 such birthday events each, with donations ranging from \$50 to \$6,000.

Mr Aseem Thakur, co-founder of GIVE.sg, welcomes the idea because it makes a positive impact.

And Ms Lynette Lim, head of communications of World Vision Singapore, says this is one way that makes people aware of the less fortunate and how to help them.

The organisation, which has a child sponsorship scheme among others, makes short presentations at birthday parties which collect donations for them. They say they often get about 20 per cent of the guests signing up to sponsor a child.

Ms Lim says: "It's always initiated by the birthday person himself because he feels he is already very blessed in life and doesn't need anything more."

For Ms Dolly Lim, 34, it was a teachable moment for her two children, aged six and three, when she threw a charity birthday bash in February at Raffles Town Club. Rather than receive more toys and gifts, she wanted them to learn that other children may not have the same privileges they do.

The director of a manufacturing firm says: "It took a little convincing as they realised they weren't going to be flooded with presents like they were last year. But it's a great way to help the charity get the word out about its cause as there is a limit on how far its advertising can reach."

In total, she raised about \$6,000 and 15 children under World Vision Singapore were sponsored by the more than 80 guests at the party.

It may not always be money which people ask for. At the 24th birthday of Dr Tan Wai Jia in February, she asked for items that an African orphanage needed. She was making a three-week mission trip – her 12th around the world to date – to Mozambique two months later to help sick children and had a wish list of much-needed items.

From that, she got a full seven-seater car load of children's clothes, shoes, stationery and sports items such as basketballs and ping-pong bats. She also collected \$2,000 in donations – the largest single donation being \$1,000.

Dr Tan, who recently graduated from medical school here, says: "It's the one day that I can ask for things that I really want. Plus, I trust my friends will be careful to donate items that are really needed. They are giving me an opportunity to bless others and that's a great gift in itself."

These birthday parties often rely on heavy support from those invited, so it may not always raise substantial amounts.

Ms Stephanie Seow raised about \$500 for a Mongolian summer camp for street kids at her birthday in March. This was less than subsequent efforts such as a bake-a-thon she organised, which raised \$1,400. The 23-year-old, who is looking to raise \$10,000 for the camp which will take place next month, says she probably will not do it again.

"I don't want my friends to think that every time it's my birthday, they have to fork out money for charity. I also want to keep ideas fresh and creative for fund-raising."

On the other hand, Ms Linda Chan, 47, whose son is friends with Mr Tan, was so touched by his efforts that she rallied family and friends who do not know him to donate to his cause. Even her sister, who lives in Osaka, Japan, gave \$500.

The office manager at a hotel says: "For a boy his age to do something like that and give up presents to help others, it's really meaningful."