



New Woman

From *Unsung Shanghai* 上海 04/02/2019

“**When you’ve acted in someone’s service,**

Home is a place built on shoulders, not pavement. Zhao Qiufang, a lady whose age belies her spirit, would tell you that. An age of 84 has taken nothing from her outlook and charisma; instead, it has only given her more of the experience and wisdom she knew the world needs most, and provide it.

After moving into Shanghai’s alleyway community in 1984, Qiufang entered the neighborhood committee as a conciliation officer. This job entailed resolving conflict in the neighborhood that would arise from fighting over public jobs as well as squabbles between in-laws. At that time, she was a new member—not recognized by most. Not yet.

As times were changing, Qiufang was not satisfied with the level of literacy within the committee, and endeavored to appoint a wave of better educated officers. Soon after taking the position of reconciliation officer, Qiufang aimed to implement many changes to their style of operation to foster a comfortable and civilized quarter. To accomplish this, she and her team interviewed every member of their community to understand the people for whom they were serving. Through this process, Qiufang quickly began to familiarize herself with the dynamics of many families within their community, allowing her to be more than apt in resolving tensions that should arise.

Within a year, the alleyway community had transformed into a cultivated environment. Residents became increasingly specialized in jobs as more moved in, and one could find helping hands at every turn. To build and maintain such environment, however, conflicts had to be mediated. Hence conciliation work, spearheaded by Qiufang, was so vital. However, even with her role in conciliation, she still had more tasks before her, the biggest of which was to earn the trust and recognition of her people. When asked how she took to those responsibilities, Qiufang brought up her greatest inspiration, whom had instilled in her many of the values she has today.



Cai Sui Ang, Qiufang reminisced, was the daughter of renowned revolutionary Cai Yuanpei. In spite of a stable income, she lived a humble life and frequently donated over half her wealth to charities. Instead of asking what the community could give her, Ms. Cai asked what she could give to the community. She passed away years ago, but lives on in the memories of those she had impacted—particularly Qiufang.

“When you’ve acted in someone’s service,” Qiufang said, “they will respect and remember you. This is my belief.”

Qiufang recalled the day a resident had suffered a head injury and was hospitalized. Surgery was required immediately...yet could not be executed without the signature of a family member, who was not available at the time. Knowing there was a probability the surgery would fail, Qiufang had nevertheless put her trust in the doctor and signed the form herself. The resident's wife, rushing to the hospital, immediately kneeled and thanked Qiufang while sobbing uncontrollably, vowing to give her full support to the neighborhood committee in the future.

It was trust, goodwill, and the idea of reciprocity that fueled the growth of this community. And how else will this community of helping hands aid people who are in need?

When an elderly friend of Qiufang's felt faint as he crossed the road, she quickly came forward to help him. After being notified, her colleague Secretary Zhang gave Qiufang a transportation card for a trip to the hospital—however, they were mid-road, and taxi hailing was almost impossible. It was then the traffic police rushed over and helped them hail a cab to the hospital.

And this was what Qiufang valued so much about this tight-knit community—these implicit networks of trust, aid, and communication unique to their longtang. "They trust me because I understand them. Whenever I make wontons, I invite everyone over to try them together. Whenever we see each other on the streets, we always stop for a chat. Whenever I feel upset, I can always vent to them my sorrows. There's no hesitation on anyone's part to listen, talk, and help."



group photo of Qiufang with 4 unsung members on interview day

To conclude, Qiufang shared a message she hoped would be the greatest takeaway of this conversation.

"The lives you live now are better than ever before," she said. "I should say, we are much more fulfilled now. The days of revolution began when I was only 13 years old. All our lives, elders like us had to flee conflict. We must never forget who we are, where we come from. We must never forget the toil and love of past generations."

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