



Trans Focus Active Ageing Centre in Bukit Timah sets aside one of its four weekly drumming fitness sessions for male seniors, who make up 40 out of the 156 members there. ST PHOTO: MARK CHONG

Made for men

All-male music, outing groups draw more retired men to take part and make friends

Shermaine Ang

To stay active, 74-year-old Jimmy Lim has been going for weekly Zumba and chair yoga – a modified form of yoga where poses can be done while seated – with his wife at Precious Active Ageing Centre (AAC) in Dawson.

But he always feels slightly out of place as the only man in the room – even though the women have "slowly accepted" him.

In June, he joined a group where he felt right at home – an all-male guitar interest group started by Esther AAC, another centre that is a three-minute walk from his Queenstown flat.

The group, which was set up in

November 2022 to engage older men, now has eight of them, including one who plays the harmonica.

"These classes not only offer opportunities for men to learn music but also provide a chance to socialise, enjoy food and establish lasting friendships," said Mr Alvin Ho, manager at Presbyterian Community Services, which oversees Esther AAC and five other such centres.

AMCs are drop-in social recreational centres that offer a range of activities and support for seniors living nearby in the community.

Mr Ho said learning at their age can allow seniors to "rekindle things that we dropped along the way as we were growing up".

He added: "And, studies have



[From left] Mr Lew Keng Seng, singer-songwriter Robin Choo, Mr Ong Tian Hoo, Mr Peter Lee and Mr William Ho are part of an all-male guitar interest group at Esther Active Ageing Centre. PHOTO: ESTHER AAC

shown that at a later age, especially for men, you need to talk more. We need to start to chat. So this coming together really generates more talking."

Esther AAC is among several centres starting activities catering to men to encourage their participation, as men are typically vastly outnumbered by women at these centres.

Ms Amy Le, centre supervisor of Esther AAC, said that about 30 men go to the centre for various activities, compared with hundreds of women. Men make up about 15 per cent of its participants.

To boost male attendance, Ms Le also organised activities such as a durian day trip in July to Johor Bah-

ru, where more than 10 women took their husbands along.

According to the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), 19 AACs have conducted regular outreach to about 50,000 seniors as at March, and an additional 35 centres have opened since April. About 40 per cent of the seniors engaged at AACs are men.

Other centres are also starting all-men activities. While running its drumming fitness programme known as Drums Alive, Trans Focus AAC in Bukit Timah found that male seniors enjoyed it, and decided to set aside one of its four weekly sessions for them.

Devised by a fitness instructor in the United States who was unable

to work out due to an injury, Drums Alive has participants drumming on a core stability ball while performing aerobics-style choreographed routines to upbeat music.

This activity is funded by AIC's \$1.36 million Fun! Fund, set up in November 2022 to support projects for seniors that are fun and meet their varying interests.

More than a year on, 13 projects have been funded so far, running the gamut from making kombucha, brewing tea, performing magic, drumming, coding and even talking part in mahjong and Rummikub – a table tile game similar to mahjong – competitions.

Mr Andy See, director of AIC's sector and partnerships division,

MANY BENEFITS

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MR ALVIN HO, manager at Presbyterian Community Services, which oversees Esther Active Ageing Centre and five other such centres.

said: "The team is exploring the inclusion of themes as part of the next grant call to address harder-to-reach demographics of seniors – including those at risk of social isolation."

"This is to encourage seniors to learn new technology and enable seniors to give back in the community in their own capacity to create meaningful experiences for them."

Such themes could include specific interests like technology or volunteerism.

The next grant call, where each project proposal can receive funding of up to \$50,000, will be in 2024.

At Trans Focus AAC, 41 out of the 156 members are men, said centre manager Chua Siew Geok. But only 28 men take part in activities, while the rest go to the centre to chat or read the newspapers, she added.

One of them, Mr Chan Chek Song, 70, used to drop by to read the newspaper before heading off, while women were engrossed in games of Rummikub or morning exercises.

In July, he joined the men's drumming group at the centre. The singing enthusiast, who used to work as an assistant sales manager, also took up weekly karaoke sessions and a zumba class at the centre.

"As long as it's something to do with music, I am very interested," he said. "I've made a lot of new friends at the centre; they're all my neighbours."

He also joined a monthly men's outing organised by the centre to places such as Dawson Skyline and Fort Canning.

Mr Lim, a former training consultant, said he was initially hesitant to join the guitar group, as the last time he picked up a guitar was 50 years ago, and his "fingers were already rusty".

But he agreed to give it a shot to make new friends.

"From there, I found that my senses came back. Then I found that it's quite fun again. Relive the old days," said Mr Lim.

The group "ights" over what songs to play – usually "nostalgic" songs from the 1960s like Cliff Richard's The Young Ones and the Bee Gees I Started A Joke.

Mr Lim gave his all for a performance by the group at the National Library in Victoria Street in October, even inviting the group to his home for extra practice. Perfecting the songs was no easy feat, as his memory was declining, and he struggles to remember chords and lyrics, he said.

But come show day, he decided to shake off the nerves and have fun playing the music of his youth.

"I just want to be contented with what I'm doing, strumming with these friends," he added.

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