

A clean shave to show they care

BY EISEN TEO

Alfie Loke and Hendri Susanto have come face-to-face with cancer.

Alfie's grandfather died a decade ago from lung cancer, while Hendri has had family members stricken by the disease.

What the Northbrooks Secondary School students took away from the tragedies was the courage and grit shown by the sufferers.

Of his relatives, Hendri, who is 15 and in Sec 3, said: "They are very determined to continue with life and they try to live life as normally as possible."

So, when their school called for male volunteers to have their heads publicly shaved to show support for cancer sufferers, the pair were the first to step up to the barber's chair.

On June 27, the Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF) visited the school in Yishun to stage Hair For Hope, an annual drive which gets participants to shave their heads as a symbolic show of solidarity with children who have cancer and to raise funds for them.

It was one of eight satellite events at secondary schools this year; five out of the eight schools, including Northbrooks Secondary, held Hair For Hope for the first time. The main event will take place over the weekend at VivoCity.

Last year, the CCF held 28 satellite events, of which 12 were held in schools. A total of 4,238 people – these included those at the main event – shaved their heads, raising almost \$2.3 million for programmes and services for CCF beneficiaries.

New to Hair For Hope, Northbrooks Secondary had expected to draw 40 to 60 volunteers.

Alfie and Hendri were the first students to lose their locks in a packed school hall that morning, together with vice-principal Oliver Osman Junus and Mr Donny Lee, head of department for the Normal (Technical) stream and discipline.

The audience lapped up every moment as the four Jean Yip hairstylists – all volunteers – prepped their shavers and towels. When teacher, and the event's co-emcee, Ms Nelleke Eng asked Mr Lee for his "last words", he replied, to laughter: "Bye bye to my hair."

The laughter gave way to cheers as the shaving began. Although mobile phones are not allowed to be used in school, Ms Eng called on



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Alfie Loke, 16, whose grandfather died of lung cancer



students to take out their phones to shoot photos and tweet about the "milestone". Co-emcee and teacher Nicholas Chua called on boys to sign up on the spot: "There is nothing to fear; your hair will grow back again."

Mr Junus' clean shave took just five minutes. He told the school: "I've never been so bald. But it is for a good cause and it's something that we are proud to do."

In all, 11 staff and 149 of the school's 1,000 students had their heads shaved – far exceeding expectations.

Of his shave, Mr Lee said: "This will feel quite cool, especially when I teach!" He added: "The

TOP: The first to step up to the chairs were (from left) Alfie, Mr Junus, Mr Lee and Hendri. Their selfless act prompted another 156 students and staff to have their heads shaved.

LEFT: Ms Elsie Toy, 53, an IT trainer, was the only female participant of the Hair For Hope event held at Northbrooks Secondary.

ST PHOTOS MARIEL VICTORIA MOK

event is in line with one of our school values – empathy. Many students may know about cancer but not the pain and suffering patients go through."

Alfie and Hendri have no regrets about losing their hair.

Alfie, who is 16 and in Sec 4, said: "If children suffering from cancer are willing to go for chemotherapy and are mentally prepared to lose their hair, then I am prepared to shave off my hair too."

Hendri dedicated his new hairstyle to "all the cancer patients out there". He added: "I want to tell them that we understand you and empathise with you."

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INTERACT!

Do you have a friend or a relative who had cancer? How did you show support for him or her? E-mail stpost@sph.com.sg and IN will print the best responses.