

FOCUS

Promoting Mutual Support in a Governing Role

Interview with Ms Jane Law, Vice-chairperson of The Hong Kong Joint Council of Parents of the Mentally Handicapped

What a journey it has been for Ms Jane Law since she joined The Hong Kong Joint Council of Parents of the Mentally Handicapped (The Council) in 1988. Started as both a committee member and the convenor of the 'Legal Rights and Services Concern Group', Jane, whose sister is intellectually disabled, is now The Council's Vice-chairperson.

The Council was set up in 1987. That year, fifteen persons whose children are intellectually disabled got together and formed the Executive Committee (ExCo). They rolled their sleeves and became a working board that undertook all work that came with starting an NGO, from setting the mission and directions to day-to-day administration. Back in the 80's and 90's, the amendment of 'Mental Health Ordinance' did not distinguish people with intellectual disability from those with mental illness. Intellectually disabled persons were severely misunderstood, exemplified by the multiple incidents of fervent protest against hostels for them in various districts. They had little legal protection, and were often given an inequitable verdict in cases of their falling victim to sexual abuse. "It's unbelievable how similar incidents still happen today," said Jane "it devastates us every time we speak up and react against instances of injustice."

In 1993, when ExCo members had a hard time looking for The Council's first paid staff to ease their burden after receiving a modest donation of over \$200,000, Jane offered herself for the position. She recalled, "It wasn't easy for the ExCo to accept my quitting, but it was agreed that The Council's development was top priority." Three years later, when The Council began to operate more smoothly, Jane resigned and returned to her job as a professional nurse. Later, she was elected again to the ExCo and resumed her voluntary service to The Council.

Once a paid staff, Jane understands well the importance of role division between ExCo and staff. "ExCo members and staff might have distinct opinions on issues, but we all anchor ourselves to The Council's mission which keeps us working as a team. The ExCo establishes principles and develops strategies, whereas the staff team executes. We hope to include more new committee members to fight for the wellbeing of our children and promote mutual support."

Last November, as part of the HKCSS delegation of the study visit to the UK on NGO governance, Jane reflected on governance cultures and practices. Despite its resource constraint, she believes that good governance will always enable The Council to live out its mission, allowing it to provide mentally handicapped persons and their families with the support they need.



As part of the HKCSS delegation, Jane (far right) visited and exchanged with a small NGO in the UK.



Jane (second left) tried her best to participate in every ExCo meeting despite her busy duty roster.