

News

Aware Showdown

OLD GUARD SAY VOLUNTEERS HELPED THEM TO VICTORY

‘Whatever you can think of, they did’

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ON SATURDAY, Ms Alex Serrenti, 35, got up at 5.15am, jumped on her motorcycle and rode to Suntec City.

She had a mission – she was there to “warm” seats for someone at an event that was to start only seven hours later.

The teaching assistant was one of about 100 “white-shirt” volunteers on the side of the former leadership of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) at its extraordinary general meeting (EGM) on Saturday.

They offered their services as legal advisors, social workers, seat-warmers, crowd-controllers, caterers, and even bodyguards for the old guard if the situation got out of hand.

These volunteers were the muscle behind the dramatic victory of the old guard, who wrestled back control of the feminist organisation from a group who had ousted them earliest this year.

The old guard did so by successfully passing a vote of no confidence in the new leaders, who then resigned.

Roughly two-thirds of the members at the EGM voted for the no-confidence motion.

Most of these volunteers were friends of the old guard, or concerned members of the public. Some were men.

Through their personal networks, they also called on others to chip in.

Amazing

Said veteran member Braema Mathi, 51: “The seat-warmers struck me the most. That kind of dedication... they were amazing.”

She added: “It’s a defining moment that people are willing to give so much of their time to do this type of job.”

She added that she felt there was so much goodwill around because people wanted to protect the secular state of Aware.

With fellow teaching assistant Ms Kamalini Ramdas, 36, Ms Serrenti headed the logistics team inside the auditorium.

By turning up early, she made sure that the old guard speakers had seats next to the microphones, and could speak easily.

When she was allowed to start queuing around 11am, she and 40

other seat-warmers were first in line.

During the meeting, Ms Serrenti was also actively involved in crowd-control, and tried to calm down the old guard supporters for the meeting to progress.

She was so busy that she did not have lunch, and only had dinner around 10pm, after the meeting was over.

Said Ms Serrenti: “It was never about us. It’s our responsibility to ensure safety for everyone.”

“Some of the old guard have spent their lives fighting for Aware. It would not have been fair if the logistics stopped them from defending their organisation.”

Although Ms Serrenti was in the final stages of her PhD, she said she “couldn’t not do anything” because she had supported several students to go for Aware’s counselling services before, and was afraid these services would be affected under the new guard.

She had been an Aware member in 2001, but had let her membership lapse.

She claimed their team initially sent letters to the new guard seeking to co-ordinate the logistics in the auditorium together, but the latter was unresponsive.

It was then that their team thought of safety measures on their own.

Volunteers like her had been planning for about three weeks, meeting at the Women’s Initiative for Ageing Successfully, a venue they arranged through a founding member of Aware, Dr Kanwaljit Soin.

Money was tight – the old guard had only \$10,000, from two anonymous donors.

Most of it was spent renting out the restaurant New York, New York for a day, so the old guard could have a place to organise themselves, and hold a press conference if their no-confidence vote failed.

When asked about the volunteers, newly-elected Aware president Dana Lam-Teo, 56, a writer, smiled.

She said: “They have given us the kind of quality service that no money can buy.”

She had never seen the We Are Aware website updated so speedily, and felt very supported because everything else was taken care of.

“Whatever you can think of, they did,” she said. “We had better organisation than the F1, I would imagine!”



THEY ‘CHOPE’ SEATS

Lawyers worked for free

WHILE Aware’s new guard had a team from Rajah and Tann to assist with their legal concerns, the old guard also had a team of legal advisors on Saturday.

The old guard’s advisors worked for free, and called themselves the “legal beagles”, playing on the term “legal eagles”.

It consisted of Mr Mark Goh, Mr Peter Low, Mr Siew Kum Hong, Ms Halijah Mohamad, Ms Poonum Mirchandani, Ms Kuan Mei, Ms Nicole Tan and Ms Asmin Moiz.

Mr Goh, who owns a small law firm, said

that all the lawyers “spontaneously” decided to work pro-bono (for the public good, without fees) because they “love the cause” and were driven by “sacrificial love”.

The “legal beagles” were unhappy with the way the new guard took over Aware, and dismantled programmes developed over many years.

Mr Goh was not an Aware member before the takeover, but he is the vice-chairman of the Archdiocesan Commission for the pastoral care of Migrants and Itinerant People

DEDICATED: Volunteer Alex Serrenti (left) got up at 5.15am to ‘warm’ seats at an event that was to start only seven hours later. (Below) Ms Singam.

TNP PICTURES: NG XI JIE, KELVIN CHNG

LEGAL BEAGLES: The old guards’ legal team, with Ms Singam (in green). They are (clockwise from bottom left) Ms Halijah Mohamad, Mr Mark Goh, and Mr Siew Kum Hong.

TNP PICTURE: BENSON ANG



THEY FEED SUPPORTERS

THEY CONTROL CROWD

THEY OFFER LEGAL HELP

What the volunteers did

Before the meeting:

- Designed white T-shirts in support of the old guard.
- Updated the website (www.we-are-aware.sg).
- Released two YouTube videos campaigning for the old guard – one featuring various women calling for support, and another an interview with Ms Dana Lam, who was eventually elected president.

- Prepared an information pack for voters, and a sign for them to hold up.
- Arrived at the venue at 7.30am to fill the seats, and ensure that key speakers from the old guard could sit close to the microphones.
- Greeted each voter, and gave out the information pack and a badge, a piece of styrofoam in the shape of a heart.
- Bought and distributed flowers to their supporters.

- Prepared to negotiate with the event organisers if there were disputes with voters’ memberships.
- Borrowed loud hailer, and supplied publicity materials.
- Reced each of the three venues which the EGM was slated to be held in.

During the meeting

- Sent out SMSes to voters’ mobile phones

(Acmi), a non-governmental organisation which has worked with Aware before.

“There are organisations that work closely with Aware, and we want to preserve these ties,” he said.

During the meeting, they sometimes offered divergent opinions to Aware’s legal team.

Others who showed up at Aware’s meeting included Mrs Bridget Lew and Mr Jolovan Wham, president and executive director of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) respectively.

Home has also worked with Aware before.

During the meeting, Mrs Lew said the new guard’s spending of \$90,000 in one month was “shameful”.

Updates

■ Aware president Ms Dana Lam has confirmed that senior lawyer Dr Thio Su Mien will not be advising or mentoring the new Aware exco, or any member of it.

■ Ms Lam will also invite back the Aware staff members who resigned during the new guard’s term. These staff members include former accounts executive, Ms Lin Phua; former human resource executive, Ms Patricia Tay; and the former centre manager, Ms Schutz Lee.

■ Ms Lam will also reinstate all of Aware’s sub-committees and their heads.

with instructions such as “Stay Calm Be Dignified” and on how to fill in the voting forms.

■ Scrutinised the counting of the votes with the audit firm.

■ Calmed down passionate old guard supporters so the meeting could progress.

■ Kept a look out for people who appeared too upset, and guided them outside, where volunteer social workers were ready to

provide counselling.

■ Supplied the audience with spring rolls, mini-sandwiches, fish fingers, onion rings, apples and water when the meeting dragged on.

Contingency plan

■ Escorted the key old guard speakers, and in case a fight broke out, were ready to act as bodyguards.