

Single dads of MH370 have no answers for their children
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By Muzliza Mustafa

In the closet in their bedroom, Lee Khim Fatt still has his wife's shirts, skirts, trousers and shoes arranged like she had never left. But she is gone, missing for the past one year.

Kelvin Shim, meanwhile, has cut his little's girl's hair short because he cannot figure out how to tie it for school. His wife always did this sort of thing.

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH370 on March 8, 2014, has turned both men into single dads, and left them groping in the dark for answers to the fate of their loved ones, as well as to deal with the challenge of raising their children alone.

Lee's wife Foong Wai Yueng, was one of 12 crew members on board MH370 that was bound for Beijing when it fell off the radar less than an hour after take-off from Kuala Lumpur. There were 227 passengers, most of whom were Chinese nationals.

Lee, 45, has left his wife's belongings in the closet exactly as they were the day she went off to work on March 8, 2014. To him, she is not dead, only missing.

"All still there. I have not removed anything. To me, she is still missing no matter what the government announces. My heart will still feel uneasy until they find something. Anything," he told The Malaysian Insider ahead of the first anniversary of the plane's disappearance.

The Malaysian government on January 29 announced that MH370 was lost in an accident and all 239 on board presumed dead.

But it brought neither clarity nor relief to Lee, whose world still remains as "black" as the first day when the devastating news came.

"The day they told me that her plane went missing, my world turned black. Missing where? I do not know. I was so depressed and lost. The first month was the worst," said Lee who works as a car salesman in the city.

He has explained the incident to his eldest child, a girl aged 11, as he feels she is old enough to understand the situation.

Lee and Foong, who married in 2003, have another child, a boy aged five.

"I sent the children to my in-laws in the early stage. I just could not cope with the whole situation. Soon after the incident, I returned to work. Work has occupied my time."

The first month after the incident, Lee said his routine after work was to come home and stare at the wall.

Lee said he felt lucky that he decided not to turn to alcohol for comfort. In fact, he added, he has not touched a drop since MH370's disappearance.

The sadness felt at the beginning turned to anger and frustration as he and other families of the passengers and crew wanted answers but got nothing concrete from the authorities.

They were also upset with the way the government and MAS had handled some of the announcements.

"So many questions beg answers but there was nothing that they could provide us with," said Lee.

More difficult now, is life as a single father raising two children.

"My son tells me not to go to work as he is afraid something bad will happen to me," he said.

Likewise, Shim, 39, is worried about his eldest child, a boy aged nine.

"He wasn't like this before. But now he cries at school and during the night," said Shim, whose wife Christine Tan was Foong's colleague and a stewardess on MH370.

He said his son also became clingy and anxious, and has started displaying behaviour that has prompted the father to seek therapy for the boy.

"He tells me not to go to work because he's afraid that I would meet with an accident and leave him. Before taking family photos, he also counts everyone to make sure that we are all there. He was never like this before," said Shim who is now raising his children alone.

He said it was difficult picking up where his wife had left off, and the frustrating things were the little routines like tying his daughter's hair.

"I have to cut her hair short because I do not know how to tie her hair. It used to be easy sending her to school. All this while, it was her mother who tied her hair.

"It's simple things like this and tiny details that only a mother would be able to provide," Shim said.

Going out to public places, too, like the shopping mall, poses a challenge when the seven-year-old girl needs the toilet.

"I cannot take her to the gents as it would spook her and I cannot take her to the ladies. Most of the time, I have to take her to the restroom for the handicapped. Some

people have scolded me for that but what else can I do?"

Shim tries to make life as normal as he can for his children by staying positive and hopeful for news on his wife and the missing plane.

He still harbours hope, even in the absence of any evidence.

"No debris, no evidence. So I am still hopeful. It is hard to move on when there is no closure," he said.

But the numbness won't go away, and the government's declaration that the plane was lost and all presumed dead has changed little for him.

"I knew it was coming. I just do not know the extent of the announcement. How do I feel? I feel numb."

The stream of theories and conspiracies proffered by pundits and experts continue to stir emotions among the families.

But Shim said he tries to read all of it objectively.

"It is good to know what others have to say. It is up to one to believe it or not. I would like to know as well. It is up to me to weigh all the pros and cons of the news and 'facts' they put out there," he said.

The theories about what happened to the plane and where it might be now only serve to highlight the inconclusiveness of the disaster and the difficulty the families face in trying to move on without closure and resolution.

"I want to find the truth," says Lokman Mustafa, whose sister Suhaili was on the plane. She was a Freescale employee and with a group of colleagues who travelled together.

Lokman said the hardest hit in their family was their mother, who could not accept the government's announcement that the plane was officially lost.

"Everyone wants to know what actually happened. My quest is still to find the truth. It is still a mystery," he said. – March 6, 2015.

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