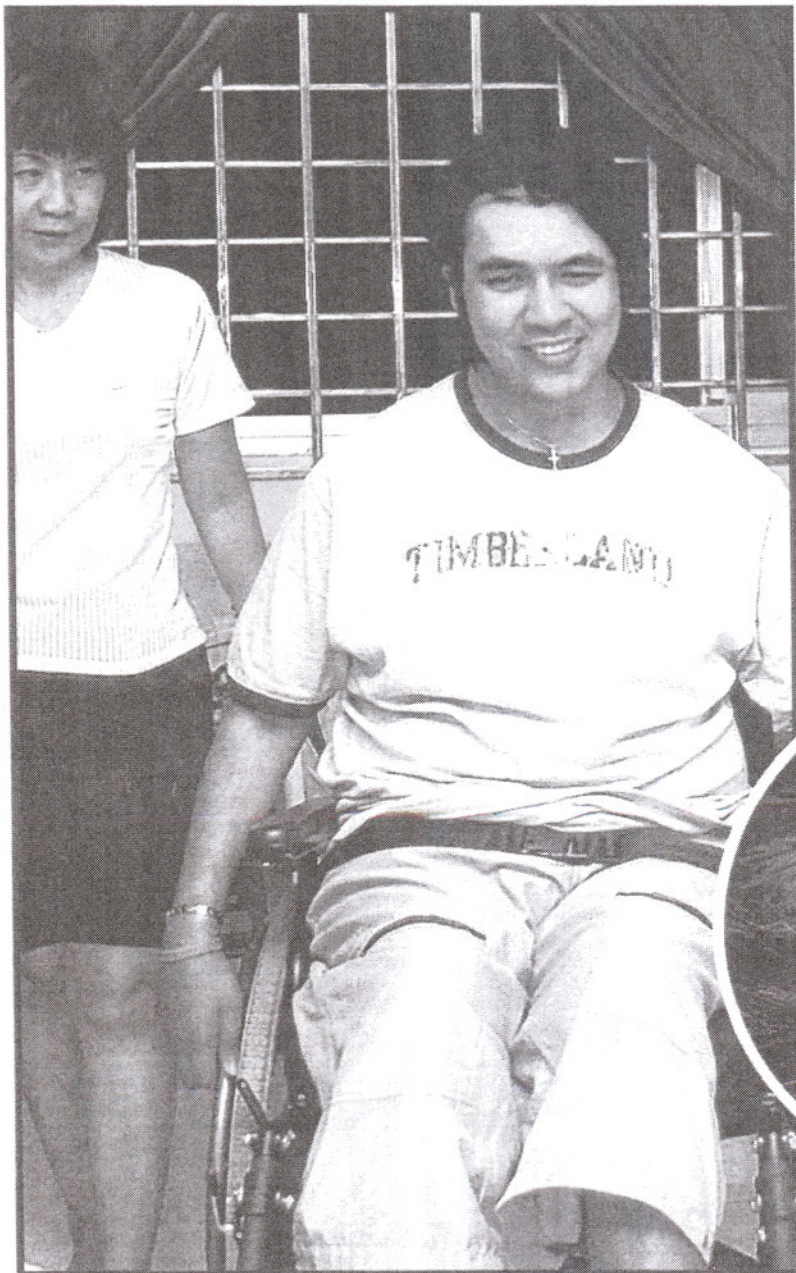


# 3 Christmases ago... He couldn't even lift his head

This year, he's  
playing Santa  
at charity dinner



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**T**HREE Christmases ago, he couldn't eat or swallow, and he didn't have the strength to hold his head up. His widowed mum and his maid had to sleep on the floor next to his bed to turn him every two hours.

This Christmas, Mr Gerard Fransis, 22, is preparing to dress up as Santa Claus and sing carols at a charity dinner while in his wheelchair. He can walk with a little help sometimes, and even won an arm wrestling contest with this reporter.

An astounding recovery, thanks to his fighting spirit.

Mr Fransis said he is doing this to encourage the elderly and less fortunate at the dinner, to show by example that they do not have to let their misfortunes get them down.

He agreed to help after being asked by Madam Alice Sim, 54, a businesswoman.

Her family and 15 others are chipping in about \$12,000 from their own pockets to host a 9-course dinner for 300 elderly from seven senior citizens' homes tonight at the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Association building at Toa Payoh.

**Mr Fransis was a full-time national serviceman when he slipped and fell from a pole on the way to the daily roll call at Sengkang Fire Station in May 2004.**

**He suffered severe head injuries, broke**

*Not only was his brain injured and bleeding badly, he also broke a vertebra. The doctor said my son may never walk again, he could be half-paralysed, can't remember anything, can't even call me 'Mummy'.*

— Mrs Cecilla Fransis  
(left, with son Gerard)



◆ The scar from the insertion of the titanium plate into Mr Gerard Fransis' skull.

Pictures: DAVID TAN

## **a vertebra in his back, and was in a coma for 10 days.**

He was rushed to Changi General Hospital, where he underwent two operations to remove blood clots in his head.

His mother, Mrs Cecilia Fransis, 51, an office manager, recalled: "Not only was his brain injured and bleeding badly, he also broke a vertebra. The doctor said my son may never walk again, he could be half-paralysed, can't remember anything, can't even call me 'Mummy'."

The news was especially devastating for her as her husband had died in 2000 from a heart attack, and her younger son Gabriel, now 20, suffers from heart murmurs and is dyslexic.

The devout Catholic said that in the 10 days that her son was in a coma, the nurses told family and friends to record themselves talking, singing and reading to him, and played the tapes day and night.

She said: "During one Christian song, his leg sort of moved, and we were so happy."

So she was overjoyed when Mr Fransis finally opened his eyes and smiled at her.

But his injuries left him with regular fits, slurred speech, altered vision and memory loss.

## **TOTALLY DISABLED**

He also lost control of his bowels and bladder, and could not perform basic tasks such as bathing and changing.

There were two large dents on either side of his head, where parts of his skull were removed during the operation.

He was fed through a feeding tube and his weight dropped to as low as 43kg from his pre-accident weight of over 60kg.

In the eight months he was in hospital – first at CGH, then Singapore General Hospital and Tan Tock Seng Hospital – Mr Fransis also underwent a spinal operation to insert screws and plates into his broken back.

He suffered a persistent infection, and was in isolation ward for several months.

Mrs Fransis remembers the first Christmas the family spent together after the accident.

"He was at rehab in TTSH, and they allowed us to take home leave. At that time, he was still using the (feeding) tube and having fits."

The family could not go to Christmas Mass, so they stayed at home.

Mrs Fransis said: "We took turns to sleep next to him on the floor. At the end of the few days, we all fell sick."

The family eventually hired a second maid to help take care of him full-time.

Things took a turn for the worse when Mr Fransis fell into depression after he was discharged from hospital.

He said: "I was moody for quite a long time. I was frustrated at first. Then the doctors and people around me, the psychiatrist, the therapists, they all helped me. They said one day you will get up... don't worry."

He said the turning point came one day when he heard God speak to him, telling him everything would be okay.

Today, Mr Fransis is working hard to regain his strength.

With the help of his maid, Ms Umi Henik, 30, who has been with the family for seven years, he does stretches and exercises every day, with dumbbells and a gym ball.

He also sees a home therapist once or twice a week, and goes for various other types of physical therapy several times a month.

He is now able to pull himself upright on his bed, and walk with the help of a walker.

Mrs Fransis said that although the Singapore Civil Defence Force covers her son's medical expenses, and the family received an insurance payout for the injuries, it still costs more than \$2,000 a month to take care of him.

This includes the cost of hiring two maids and buying adult diapers.

She said that the doctors recommended that he start an IT course next year, so he can slowly find his way back to work.

3 Christmases ago...  
**He couldn't even lift his head**

WHEELS



■ Yesterday, The New Paper

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HE had not stood up in public for three years. But yesterday night, Mr Gerard Fransis did it, all for a good cause.

Everyone at a charity dinner at the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Association watched anxiously as he struggled to stand on stage.

And when he finally did, it triggered an applause and a standing ovation from the 350-strong audience.

Mr Fransis broke a vertebra in his back after a fall in 2004 and relies on a wheelchair to get around.

Yesterday, The New Paper had reported that the 22-year-old would dress up as Santa Claus at the dinner.

Dressed in a red-and-white Santa suit, Mr Fransis moved with the help of a walker for 10 minutes and mingled with the audience.

With a broad smile, he distributed red packets to the elderly at the charity dinner at Toa Payoh.

The 3½-hour event was organised by 16 families who chipped in about \$12,000 to host a nine-course dinner for the aged from seven senior citizens' homes.

**AFRAID**

The homes include Thuja Home @ Pelangi Village and Tai Pei Old People's Home. The families got to know one another through a meditation group.

Mr Fransis, who also sang Christmas carols on stage, told The New Paper on Sunday: "I was intimidated by the thought of standing up in front of so many people. I was afraid that I would fall."

"But I managed quite well."

Mr Fransis was a full-time national serviceman when he fell from a pole on the way to a daily roll call at Sengkang Fire Station in May 2004.



**I ADMIRE THE YOUNG MAN. HE PUT ASIDE HIS FEARS... (WE ARE) TOUCHED THAT HE CAME ALL THE WAY TO GIVE US HONGBAOS AND WISH US MERRY CHRISTMAS.**

— Mr Kun Ah Gaur

He was in a coma for 10 days. Doctors told his mother, Mrs Cecilia Fransis, 51, an office manager, that he might never walk again.

But thanks to a strong fighting spirit, therapy and daily exercise, he is on the road to recovery.

Madam Alice Sim, 54, a businesswoman and one of the organisers of last night's dinner has known the Fransis family for two years.

When she invited Mr Fransis to the event, he didn't hesitate.

He said: "I wanted to come to the charity because I want to encourage people and show them that there is hope in any situation. They shouldn't give up the fight."

To that, Mr Kun Ah Gaur, 72, of Geylang Bahru Lions Befrienders, said: "I admire the young man. He put aside his fears and plucked up the courage to stand up before hundreds of people."

"Most of us are very touched that he came all the way to give us hongbao and wish us Merry Christmas."

Added Madam Sim: "We have been hosting charity events on festive occasions such as Christmas, Vesak Day, Mid-Autumn Festival and Deepavali for the last seven years."

"Last year, we also organised a charity event on Halloween."

Yesterday's programme included a lucky draw and karaoke sing-along session.

And Santa Claus was not the only star of the evening. Just as popular was the God of Fortune who also handed out red packets.

Said Madam Sim: "We wanted to give red packets to every elderly, but Santa usually doesn't give hongbaos. So why not have both?"

"One can give out sweets and presents and the other can distribute the red packets."

— With additional reporting by Tay Shi'an

# WHEELCHAIR MAN STANDS UP FOR CHARITY



**Festive giving:** (Above) Mr Gerard Fransis as Santa Claus and the Fortune God giving out red packets to the old folks. (Top) Mr Fransis is helped out of his wheelchair on stage.

pictures | gavin foo