

# Baby Love

Sanctuary House was initially set up as an informal volunteer group to help desperate unwed mothers, but as SAKINAH MANAFF discovers, it has now successfully carved a "below the radar" service niche for itself.

Finding babies on her doorstep is nothing new for Rose Siow, one of the founders of Sanctuary House, a nonprofit haven for abandoned babies. In 2003, Rose and a few other parents concerned about the increasing numbers of abandoned babies, got together and started an informal group to take in unwanted babies. Hoping to prevent spur-of-the-moment decisions by desperate parents, who may shy away from official agencies that would ask too many questions, they discreetly made it known that they were willing to take in babies who might otherwise be abandoned.

Almost a year later in late 2004, a young distressed couple rang the doorbell at Rose's Bukit Timah home, by sheer coincidence, and asked her to take in their newborn. They had no idea about the group or that Rose was part of it. The mother handed Rose the baby and a bag with a few items, and left without leaving their names or contact details. After three weeks, when Rose realised that the couple was not coming back for their child, she called the police.

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What started out as a casual volunteer group – comprising a financial consultant, a gynaecologist, a paediatrician and a few other professionals – has now become Sanctuary House, a registered charity and volunteer welfare organisation. It also has a board of advisors that includes high profile individuals like Washington Sycip, Chairman, Asia Pacific Advisory Committee of The New York Stock Exchange.



When it was officially launched in July 2005, **A workshop on the secrets of discipline conducted at Tampines Regional Library.**

Sanctuary House aimed to provide a safe haven for unwanted babies, while empowering parents to make informed decisions about their babies' futures. Today, it has also expanded its services to include emergency infant care (for mothers who are incapacitated due to hospitalisation, incarceration and financial problems); pre-adoption infant care; post-adoption services; and family education programmes.

Noel Tan, Sanctuary House's programme director and one of its founders, reckons that between 10 and 15 babies are abandoned every year in Singapore. He is quick to point out that Sanctuary House is a 'below the radar' niche service to help desperate young mums – usually children themselves – and their children. "We provide services that are not currently available in the social services network," he says. "There are numerous agencies more capable than we are at counseling and providing financial assistance, so we work with them to streamline the processes and avoid redundancies."

Today, most of Sanctuary House's cases are referred by doctors, hospitals and crisis shelters. Typically, the clients are young single mothers, mostly from low-income and dysfunctional families. The fathers are usually not identified or present. According to Tan, when a case is directed to them, a Sanctuary House representa-

tive will meet with the client at the social worker's office or, often, at the hospital, where they will be ready to receive the baby upon discharge. The procedures are explained to the client while the baby is placed in the temporary custody of Sanctuary House.

The child then goes to one of the volunteers' homes, where it will be cared for a period that can last from two weeks to three months. If the mother eventually decides to keep and care for her child, the baby will be returned to her. However, if she opts for adoption, the baby remains with the volunteer until the adoption process is completed, and is then transferred to the custody of the adoptive parents. To date, Sanctuary House has handled 18 cases with a quarter of the mothers choosing to take back their babies.

Apart from two full-time staff, Sanctuary House is mostly supported by volunteers who handle the day-to-day running of the organisation as well as infant care. Through NVPC, Sanctuary House received some 'seed' money but generally relies on ad hoc corporate donations for funding. The good news is that this coming 23 August, for the first time, it will be a co-beneficiary in a charity gala dinner organised by the Association of Women Doctors in Singapore.

"The charity dinner is a great way to raise funds for us because we don't advertise our services for fear that desperate parents will be encouraged to abandon their babies," says Tan. "The idea is for us to be extinct over time so that there is no need for our services."

Now that's an unusual baby bonus. ☆

For more information about Sanctuary House, visit [www.sanctuaryhouse.com.sg](http://www.sanctuaryhouse.com.sg).