

Editor's note: As Hong Kong gradually recovers from the Nov 26 Tai Po fire, China Daily reporters spoke with those involved in the catastrophic event, who, despite the heartbreak, agreed to share their stories. Their accounts spread a message of unity and resilience — embodying the enduring “Lion Rock Spirit” — that continues to lead the city through adversity.

Together we stand

Members of the Hong Kong Mainland University Student Volunteers on Nov 29 assemble donated carts for survivors to transport relief supplies at Wang Fuk Court. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Mutual healing

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong

In the wake of the Wang Fuk Court fire, Wendy Pan Yuqin — a psychologist for the Hong Kong Mainland University Student Volunteers — has observed an uptick in demand for counseling services from many young student volunteers who worked on the fire frontline.

Initially, many of them blamed their feelings on upcoming final examinations. But, when their low spirits persisted, they began to attribute them to the Wang Fuk Court blaze, where they had helped to bring solace to those affected by the catastrophe.

Pan called this mental stress on the volunteers psychological “secondary damage”, probably caused by their frontline involvement in the disaster’s aftermath.

“Some of the youngsters asked me: ‘If life’s so uncertain, what’s the point of studying so hard? A single fire could wipe out everything,’” Pan said.

She responded to their feelings

by saying that if there is a silver lining, there would be heartfelt reflection and, with it, a sense of relief.

Many students seeking psychological support are among the more than 200 volunteers from the Hong Kong Mainland University Student Volunteers, who mobilized overnight following an online call for assistance on Nov 26 to help victims of the blaze. According to Guan Xin, the group’s founder, the student volunteers addressed immediate needs, providing essentials such as blood pressure monitors for the elderly and offering support to those in distress.

Pan asked the volunteers to describe the victims they had encountered. “They seemed quite composed, really resilient,” one volunteer replied. “I felt I wasn’t as strong as they are.”

Another volunteer said: “Despite everything, the victims still kept saying ‘thank you.’”

Psychologists call this “post-traumatic growth”, Pan explained. The strength to help volunteers recover is, in fact, a two-pronged process — healing the victims, as well as themselves.

Into rescue gear

By WILLIAM XU in Hong Kong
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Amid the shopping frenzy of Black Friday, as Kelvin Sun Kuan and his Shenzhen team raced to manage soaring overseas orders for their Hypershell outdoor exoskeleton gear, news of the Wang Fuk Court fire in Hong Kong struck like a tremor — a tragedy that pulled at their heartstrings.

Scrolling through pop-up blaze updates, Sun, the founder of exoskeleton firm Hypershell, realized his products could potentially empower the rescue teams.

Weighing just 1.8 to 2 kilograms, the exoskeleton gear fits the lower body like a “second skin”, using a built-in motor to provide up to 40 percent additional leg strength. A chip inside analyzes the user’s movement patterns and adjusts power

output for slopes, stairs or rugged terrain.

“Although our exoskeletons are not medical equipment, they have become a life-changing tool for many,” said Sean Zhang Xiaohu, a designer of the Hypershell products. “With our gear, some elderly people, or people recovering from muscle or joint injuries, can enjoy outdoor adventures with family and friends.”

Sun contacted the Hong Kong authorities to offer help. His gesture was noticed by the Chinese mainland authorities who quickly mobilized cross-boundary aid on Nov 29 when the Tai Po fire had been largely extinguished, and rescuers were preparing to enter the buildings.

The company donated 200 sets of exoskeleton outfits — nearly their entire spot inventory — plus batteries and chargers, to Hong Kong.

Elaine Xia Wan, who oversees e-commerce sales and logistics at Hypershell, worked into the night to inform overseas buyers that deliveries of their Black Friday orders would be delayed. “Most expressed full understanding and support,” she said.

A five-member team, led by training specialist Kent Xu Jiabin, subsequently arrived in Hong Kong to brief rescue personnel. The next morning, more than 10 rescuers were at the fire site, wearing Hypershell outfits. “One returned at noon and told me he was able to climb from the ground floor to the 31st in one go,” Xu said. Soon, more rescuers began to adopt the gear.

On Dec 5, Lui Kam-ho, director of operations of the Hong Kong Police Force, said the exoskeleton gear was one of the most practical pieces of



Police officers wearing exoskeleton gear donated by Hypershell continue search operations at Wang Fuk Court on Dec 1. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

equipment provided by the Chinese mainland.

“This cooperation has allowed Hong Kong to deeply feel the warmth and support of the motherland,” he said.

“We know we did the right thing,” Sun added.

Reliving it all

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong
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Man Cheung, 76, and his wife are lucky to be alive.

Weeks after the deadliest fire to hit Hong Kong in nearly eight decades, the couple are still in the same clothes they were wearing on that fateful day of Nov 26, 2025, when they left home on personal errands — just hours before a blaze swept through seven of the eight towers at Wang

Fuk Court, taking the lives of at least 161 residents.

Their modest apartment was in Wang Tai House, the building where the fiercest fire raged and where the heaviest death toll of 82 people was recorded.

Man took his first photograph of the blaze at 3:16 pm, about 25 minutes after it broke out, as smoke coiled around the vast green mesh erected across the residential complex for renovation work and flames rapidly gushed up the building at an incredible speed before spreading to the other blocks, fanned by dry seasonal winds. His next shot, taken at 6:03 pm, showed the other towers scorched and still in flames.

“The images are hard to bear,” sighed Mrs Man. “I was heartbroken and cried for the devastation and what I had lost,” she said, glancing at a small pink bag she was carrying. Inside was a cellphone she had bought just days before the tragedy.

“We’re more heartbroken for our neighbors in Wang Tai House — our friends

who have lost their lives. It’s sad,” she said.

She recalled an elderly man living next door who reportedly got trapped in his flat because he relied on an oxygen tank to survive and could not move downstairs quickly enough with it on him. The couple’s regular badminton partner, who lived in an apartment a floor below theirs, has yet to be found and is thought to be among six residents still unaccounted for as of Dec 10.

The Mans are being accommodated in transitional housing in the Tsuen Wan district and have received HK\$100,000 (\$12,820) in government relief so far, as well as financial aid from NGOs.

Their friend, Lee Shu-pine, 77, who was also a resident of Wang Fuk Court, has found herself disoriented, with social workers assigned to help her by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government being changed weekly. It is a rotation that has required her to relive the fire trauma as she recounts her experiences to them each time anew.

Lee said memories of the inferno haunt her nightly, depriving her of sleep. However, she plucked up enough courage to visit the scene of the fire on Dec 2, seven days after a person’s death is called *tau cat* in Cantonese, and is when a traditional mourning ritual is observed.

Lee wept as she looked at the ruins of the estate, but her sorrow was muted by the sea of floral tributes left by people from across Hong Kong who had turned up in droves to be with the victims in their hour of grief and show support — a gesture that has brought comfort and hope to those affected, like Lee and the Mans.

“We must now move ahead,” said Mrs Man. “But every dollar now counts,” she added, having allowed herself just one pair of new pants since the disaster. Their top priority is to secure a permanent home again, hopefully, as part of resettlement options offered by the SAR government.

Shan Wenxuan contributed to this story.

All lives do matter

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong

When firefighters involved in battling the Wang Fuk Court blaze handed Sharon Pong Kwok charred animal remains, she was devastated.

At 5 pm on Nov 26 — about two hours after the first flames tore through the estate’s buildings — Kwok, who works for a local parrot rescue group, was alerted by a friend, Kimmy, a Wang Fuk Court resident who had already fled her apartment. But her three parrots remained trapped inside her already smoke-obscured home.

“The fire was right there, blazing, yet we felt a biting cold,” Kwok recalled. Kimmy’s parrots were rescued and survived. A savannah monitor lizard in Kwok’s care,

however, did not survive.

According to the Hong Kong Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the blaze affected at least 537 animals, with 364 recovered from the scene, and 294 of them surviving.

Kwok said on-site animal welfare groups had coordinated swiftly, handling reptiles, birds, dogs and cats, and compiled information on missing pets for firefighters.

Each time firefighters emerged

from the flames with a surviving animal, the crowds would break out into applause, she added.

The HKPR said that some owners cannot reclaim their pets yet. But the organization promised that the animals will be safely cared for until their owners are ready to welcome them back.

A volunteer from Hong Kong Parrot Rescue calms a rescued cat at Wang Fuk Court on Nov 26. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Close shave

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong

Thirty-eight-year-old Filipino domestic helper Carren is haunted by the tragic loss of her friend and fellow maid, Maryan Pascual Esteban, who was one of 10 foreign domestic helpers killed in the devastating Tai Po blaze.

Esteban’s body was reportedly found in one of the burnt towers, on the ninth floor, where Carren worked. “I believe she might have been trying to knock on my door,” Carren said. “It’s so sad thinking about it.”

The two maids were close and used to spend their time chatting in the park nearby while watching the children under their care.

Carren can only remember flashes of how she escaped from the inferno.

It was around 3 pm on Nov 26 as the maid and a 5-year-old child

under her care were watching television in their flat. Her employer’s voice suddenly came through on closed-circuit television, calling, “You’ve got to come down now. There’s a fire.”

There was no fire alarm, but Carren’s response was swift. She immediately switched off the TV, grabbed the child and her cellphone, and rushed out. Initially, the blaze appeared to have been “contained”, with only thin wisps of smoke in the hallway. She did not think of grabbing the HK\$18,000 (\$2,316) she had saved up to visit her 7-year-old son in the Philippines.

Outside the flat, fiery debris rained down around them — one piece landing on Carren’s sleeve and setting it alight. “It was just fire, smoke, smoke, fire,” she recalled.

“Sometimes, at night, my eyes

are filled with tears,” Carren said, adding that loud noises now startle her.

Carren currently lives with relatives of her employer and, with their help, has received HK\$20,000 in government relief — a grant that has also been given to 109 other domestic helpers who were working in the Wang Fuk Court.

Carren recently attended a group counseling session and community fair with other survivors. “Sharing our experiences as a community really helps,” she said. “It makes me feel better.”

Her employer has agreed to cover the cost of her trip home to the Philippines in January — a visit she had planned long before the fire. She vividly recalls her son’s tearful relief during a video call and his words: “Mama, you’re safe now. Can you come home?”