

# Law undergrads in court's pilot scheme

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WHEN a woman squared off with her ex-husband at the Family Court in November last year, she did not have a divorce lawyer, unlike the man, who was represented.

Instead, the woman, who was seeking maintenance for herself and their child, had help from two law students, who sat behind her taking notes.

"We told her our role was not to give her legal advice," said one of the students, Miss Gay Hui Yi, 22, a third-year Law student. "We could only help her with court procedures and take notes."

In the end, an agreement was reached and the woman settled with just maintenance for her child. The students, from the Pro Bono Group of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore, are two of 11 law undergraduates roped in by

## THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

The term "McKenzie Friend" originated from a 1971 divorce case between the McKenzies in the United Kingdom, where Mrs McKenzie qualified for legal aid but Mr McKenzie did not.

The judge refused to let Mr McKenzie represent himself, along with a friend to help him in court.

Mr McKenzie appealed and the Appellate Court overturned the judgment, allowing him to have his friend assist him.

the Subordinate Courts for a pilot of its Lay Assistant Scheme.

The scheme aims to help litigants caught in the middle – those who are not eligible for legal aid as they earn above the

annual salary cap of \$10,000 and yet cannot afford a lawyer. The other party must have a lawyer for the litigant to qualify.

"This is to make sure everybody has the best help they can get," said Mr Toh Han Li, the Subordinate Courts registrar, addressing reporters yesterday.

The scheme is a modified version of a McKenzie Friend, a person, usually one with some legal background, who attends hearings with lawyer-less litigants, advising them in court on non-legal issues and helping them with administrative tasks.

Singapore needs such a scheme given the rise in the number of people who represent themselves in court.

Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong first announced plans for McKenzie Friends last May, when he said such people could help litigants overcome the burden of appearing in court alone. However, the lay assistants are not allowed to act as legal representatives.

"It's very tempting to want to step in but we know what is the limit," said Ms Cassandra Ow, 21, another third-year law student in the pilot project.

The assistants are not allowed to address the court and any breach of court rules would see them facing a maximum fine of \$1,000 or a jail term of up to six months.

Since the pilot project started in September, the students, who were given a two-hour training session by senior court officials, have helped in one case and more cases would be assigned to them.

"One of the benefits of involving law students in this scheme is to inculcate the spirit of volunteerism early on in the aspiring lawyer's career so that when the law student becomes a full-fledged lawyer, he or she will be motivated to do pro bono legal work," Ms Seeto Wei Peng, the Subordinate Courts' corporate communications deputy director, told TODAY.