

YOUTH

Refreshing memories

A new reality show that tasks people with cognitive disorders with waiting on tables aims to highlight their lives — and makes for unforgettable viewing, **Wang Kaihao** reports.



It's one of those restaurants where the waiters and waitresses often confuse the orders and take the dishes to the wrong tables — but in this case it's unlikely that any customers will complain.

Piloting on Tencent's video-streaming platform on April 30, *Forget Me Not Cafe* is a reality show that aims to inspire people to look beyond the laughs and think about the bigger issues in society.

In the 10-episode show, five senior citizens from all over China who have been diagnosed with a cognitive disorder are invited to work each week as servers at a restaurant in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, in a bid to raise awareness of intellectual disabilities in a lighthearted way.

Such disorders affect people's cognitive abilities, with Alzheimer's disease accounting for the majority of cases in this area.

When 45-year-old film actor Huang Bo, who's one of China's biggest box office draws, was first invited to join the show as the "restaurant operator", he didn't hesitate to accept, despite some initial concerns.

"I have to take care of elderly participants and their health problems," he says. "I don't want the show to have a heavy tone, but it's important to reflect social issues in a feel-good way."

Among the five senior citizens who appear in the first episode, only 68-year-old Tan Shaozhu used to work in restaurants. Sun Lijun, 63, is a former gynecologist; Li Junhu, 69, was a plumber; Hu Gongying, 76, was a teacher; and 80-year-old Li Dongqiao is a retired military officer. "Sometimes it's like working with five children," Huang says. "But

their life experiences, sense of responsibility, persistence and positive outlooks are always present, which I find deeply touching."

Many funny moments arise in the pilot episode of the show.

For example, during rehearsals, a participant forgets to ask the "customer" (played by Huang) to pay the bill. Consequently, once the restaurant opens, he keeps staring back at the table he serves in case someone "dines and dashes", leaving without paying the bill. His unflappable attention confuses many customers.

Another participant accuses the chef of making the wrong dish, until she realizes she had simply forgotten which dish the customer had ordered.

Other moments are capable of reducing the audience to tears. When one elderly waitress tries to explain to customers that she is a patient, she even forgets the name of her disease.

She has a good time talking and playing with a child who dines in the restaurant. However, when the child comes to the restaurant again the next day and says hello to her, she feels in the dark.

"I saw how well they danced together the day before," Huang says, becoming emotional. "But I could tell from her eyes that she didn't remember the child at all."

Unlike other reality shows, no scripts are prepared for the program. And for director Wang Tong, this makes *Forget Me Not Cafe* one of the most difficult shows she has ever worked on. Her team has to edit down hours of footage to create a "natural flow" of events.

"We are only recorders and observers," she explains. "It's like making a documentary. The program should



Above: Actors Huang Bo (left) and Zhang Yuankun talk about their experiences shooting the reality show, *Forget Me Not Cafe*, in a recent promotional event in Beijing. **Top left:** Tan Shaozhu, a server of the restaurant. **Top right:** Li Junhu, another waiter.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



"The program should truly reflect these people's struggle to live good lives and fight against disease."

Wang Tong, director

truly reflect these people's struggle to live good lives and fight against disease, and not to put on a 'show'."

Huang reveals that he once gave one of the five guests the title of "excellent employee."

"I didn't expect my encouragement to offend the other four participants," the actor says. "They grew quite angry and, for a moment, I didn't quite know how to handle the situation."

According to Li Yang, a producer

with Tencent, the show aims to show more moments like these to help young people better understand the behavior of patients and relate to their lives.

"We've made so many reality shows, but we have to confess that seniors are a largely neglected sector in previous programs," she says.

"After all, every one of us will become old one day."

"For young people, they probably have elderly relatives in their fami-

lies who have Alzheimer's," the producer continues. "But do they really know the disease well? Through this show, people can also learn how to face up to it positively."

Many entertainment idols from the younger generation have joined Huang's team on the show, including Song Zu'er and Zhang Yuankun, both 21 years old.

Zhang says the show helped to raise his awareness about issues affecting the elderly and reminded him to offer them more care and attention.

"After I took part in the show, I immediately took my grandparents to get a physical examination," Zhang says. "The older generation needs more care from us."

The production team vetted 1,500 people with cognitive disorders nationwide to prepare for the show, and referred to experts on medical ethics to check whether the project adhered to the rules.

Jia Jianping, one of the medical consultants for the show, who's a neurologist from Xuanwu Hospital of Capital Medical University, praised it for being productive.

"Allowing patients to participate in projects helps them to practice using their minds," says Jia. "When society cares for patients and offers them hope, these diseases will no longer be regarded as undefeatable."

The production team estimates that China has around 10 million people with Alzheimer's disease, and this number rises to nearly 50 million when all the cognitive disorders are combined.

And, as the program's team reveals, life can often be cruel. For instance, one of the waiters on the show, Hu Gongying, previously

taught English at a community college for the elderly but had kept her disease as a secret from the school. However, when she was contacted by the production team, Hu was forced to make the difficult choice: Should she expose herself as a patient or not? Hu finally stepped up to speak out for patients' interests but at the cost of losing her teaching position at the college.

"Maybe the disease cannot be thoroughly cured, and we can only slow its progression," Hu says. "But we can prove that we're not useless people through this show. We enjoy our lives very much."

But as with all things, the cafe in the show will eventually have to close its doors.

Huang recalls that one participant in the show broke into tears during a break, saying: "I really don't want to go back into the real world. Here, I feel I'm a more valuable person."

"These five people have set an amazing example," he says. "I'm sure they will touch more people. Things will become different."

The show is rated 9.3 out of 10 points on Douban.com, a TV-and-film-review website, as one of the highest-scoring Chinese reality shows in recent years.

Li Yang, the producer, says she expects *Forget Me Not Cafe* to inspire more enterprises and institutions to open up more positions to people with cognitive disorders.

"They deserve more interaction with people," she says. "If the whole of society can move in the right direction, our goal will be realized."

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