

# Ex-grassroots leader gets 8 months' jail

As branch treasurer, he embezzled \$78,000 from PAP account

BY ELENA CHONG

A FORMER People's Action Party (PAP) grassroots leader was jailed eight months yesterday for stealing more than \$78,000 from a party bank account.

Peter Lee Yoke Leong lifted his head in shock when he heard the sentence, which capped a spectacular fall from grace for a man who once counted MPs and other leaders as close friends.

District Judge Liew Thiam Leng said the 43-year-old violated the trust he had been handed as treasurer of the PAP's Aljunied-Kembangan branch.

It was there, last year, that he embezzled \$78,461 over the course of five

months, Deputy Public Prosecutor April Phang told the court.

In one incident in February, he wrote a \$50,000 cheque on the branch's bank account and cashed it.

He then used the money for his personal expenses.

An official from PAP headquarters filed a police report in August, more than a year after officials noticed a \$70,000 discrepancy in the books of the Aljunied-Kembangan branch.

The court heard that Lee, a father of two, lost his \$18,000-a-month job with a money broking firm, Nittan Capital, in March last year.

He had been a volunteer at the PAP branch for more than six years, helping out in community functions and projects.

Before his sentence was handed down yesterday, his lawyer submitted several letters of support from Members of Parliament and grassroots leaders.

In the testimonials, many asked the



Urging the court to be lenient, Lee's lawyer submitted testimonials from MPs and grassroots leaders who said he had been a hard-working constituency volunteer. ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

court for leniency.

Dr Ong Seh Hong, MP for Marine Parade GRC, described Lee as a "very active and dedicated volunteer" who had contributed a lot of his time and effort in voluntary and community work.

"He has paid for his mistake partly by losing his job and his standing in the community," he said.

Mr Neo Tiam Boon, chairman of the Kampong Kembangan Community Club management committee, said Lee was a "model grassroots leader, one who is sincere and selfless".

Lee's lawyer, Mr Noor Mohamed Marican, argued for a fine instead of jail time.

He said Lee has been shunned by former colleagues and friends, has become depressed and had several emotional breakdowns.

Mr Marican said Lee resigned from all his posts to avoid causing further embarrassment to the grassroots leaders and members.

But DPP Phang said Lee drew out the police investigation into the case, confessing only when the evidence against him was overwhelming.

She argued that sentencing precedents showed a jail term was necessary. Other white-collar criminals have been locked up for embezzling much less than \$78,000, she said.

Lee has since repaid the money.

Like-minded offenders, she added, should not be given the impression that they can avoid jail by coughing up their ill-gotten gains.

Lee, who is now a cabby, could have been jailed for up to three years and fined for criminal breach of trust.

elena@sph.com.sg