




ANS
AUTISM NETWORK SINGAPORE

This Is Me

See Me In A Different Light

A collection of real stories of persons on the autism spectrum, caregivers and professional staff – their challenges, aspirations and dreams




CONTENTS

FOREWORD

As part of Autism Awareness Month this year, we have put together a collection of stories that sheds light on the autism community. The campaign aims to promote not just awareness but also acceptance.

Titled #ThisIsMe, the 10 deeply personal stories are told from the perspective of persons on the autism spectrum, their caregivers and professionals who work with them. These are stories of patience, compassion and resilience, of rising above challenges to bring dignity, hope and meaning to their lives.

Autism is a neurological condition that begins early in childhood and lasts a lifetime. Even though early intervention and education can help improve long-term outcomes, living with autism often presents lifelong challenges. These challenges vary, as autism spans a broad spectrum, and the following stories highlight the different issues.

Communication and socialisation are perhaps less well understood by the public. Cheryl Yeo, Owen Liu and Tyra Sofieya (or Sofie for short) may all have limited verbal communication ability, but their caregivers have all found ways to connect with them. Owen, for example, may not speak, but he writes letters to communicate his needs.

Another challenge involves their fixation with unusual areas of interests. For example, Ahmad Fathuzzaman is intrigued by electronic devices; Muhammad Aqram Bin Mohd Yazed must wear his army boots everywhere he goes; Darius Koh has a fascination with foreign languages; while Sofie would always order French fries when she is at Swensen's. These fixations might seem strange to many of us, but they are part and parcel of living with autism. In fact, their peculiar interests may help some of them in the long run, such as when Elliot Chia's interest in Japanese anime led him to pursue a degree in animation and a career in the industry.

But the toughest challenge is the meltdowns. Such outbursts may seem like acts of defiance or aggression to bystanders (Cheryl's protests at MRT platforms). They may also cause harm to others (David Rudolph's throwing of objects out of the window) or themselves (Darius' and Sofie's tendency to engage in self-injurious behaviours). But these behaviours are actually a result of emotional dysregulation due to heightened anxieties. The anxieties can result from sensory overload or sensory-seeking caused by their neurological differences.

During such meltdowns, particularly when they happen in public, the stress exacts a toll on both the individual and their caregivers. For instance, both Jacqueline Ang, mother of Cheryl, and Winson Koh, father of Darius, have borne the brunt of unkind reactions from passersby. But they have learnt to shrug off hurtful looks and comments.

Parents also devote themselves to learning as much as they can about their children's condition, such as Jacqueline's meticulous planning for her daughter to commute safely on the MRT. There are also major lifestyle changes to accommodate their children's needs like living on the ground floor, as Clara Toh chose to do. The burden of these caregivers is undoubtedly a heavy one. They face more financial challenges than other parents and often struggle to balance work commitments with caregiving responsibilities.

This is why it is vital for caregivers to master self-care so that they can better support their children. In the marathon of caregiving, these parents are tireless in their efforts to integrate their children into the community – whether it is by equipping them with social and academic skills, training them in life skills, or exposing them to recreational activities like playing the piano and sports.

In return, many find they have learnt and gained much from their charges. For instance, Rasidah Namboka says caring for Sofie, her granddaughter, has taught her to be a lot more empathetic. And out of that empathy came From One Parent to Another, a support group to connect parents and caregivers of children with special needs.

There are also many dedicated professionals, like Dennis Tan and Sarayanan Mariappa, who share the load of these caregivers through their work. Both aspire to improve the lives of their clients by offering opportunities for recreation and socialisation. More importantly, they find great meaning in their work and look forward to making a difference daily.

Inclusive employers have made a world of difference too, which can be seen with Elliot and Aqram. Still, there are many more like them who may be equally capable but do not have access to similar job opportunities. Employment accords the dignity of financial independence, something that Elliot and Aqram, as well as their caregivers, are grateful for.

Of course, the stories do not cover all the challenges of living with autism. There are many other pressing issues, especially the "cliff effect" where individuals are a little lost after they graduate from mainstream or SPED schools. The lack of support in Institutes of Higher Learning, employment opportunities and places in Day Activity Centres and Adult Disability Homes remain a concern for many caregivers. Most parents are also worried about the availability of support systems when they are no longer around to care for their children.

But these 10 personal accounts show that with support from the wider community, persons on the autism spectrum can lead meaningful and dignified lives. Indeed, it takes more than a village to raise, educate and care for persons on the autism spectrum. Everyone – from policymakers to service providers, family members to members of the public – can and must play a part. We invite all of you to read these stories and better understand the challenges of living with autism across the spectrum.

The stories and campaign are coordinated by the Autism Network Singapore, which comprises five Social Service Agencies: Autism Association (Singapore), Autism Resource Centre (Singapore), AWWA, Rainbow Centre, and St. Andrew's Autism Centre. If you are inspired to journey with us, contact any of the five Social Service Agencies.

We invite you to join us in making a difference.

Bernard Chew

Chief Executive Officer, St. Andrew's Autism Centre

Advisor to the World Autism Awareness Month Campaign, Singapore, 2022

Mrs Jacqueline Yeo (right) on a walk with her twin daughters – Eunice (left) and Cheryl (middle) – at Marina Barrage.

> “There are many people who have walked this journey and many who are walking alongside us. We learn together.”
>
> **Mrs Jacqueline Yeo**

MY CHILDREN SCREAM ALL DAY BUT I’M GRATEFUL FOR EACH DAY, SAYS MOTHER OF TWINS ON THE SPECTRUM

Hunkered down cross-legged on the floor, 20-year-old Cheryl Yeo is staging a silent sit-down protest by the platform doors of an MRT station. Despite the cajoles of her hapless domestic helper and chaperone May, she refuses to budge.

This is actually considered progress. “Now it’s not too bad, at least she’s in the train station,” said her mother, Mrs Jacqueline Yeo, 45, while playing the video of the sit-down protest.

In the past, Cheryl would dash out of the station. That was when she first started taking the train after enrolling at the St Andrew’s Autism Centre’s Day Activity Centre at Sengkang in January 2021.

It has since stopped. After 16 months of experimentation to find the best way for Cheryl to commute, miniscule milestones have been achieved. Today, crying at the station is considered a marked improvement.

Yet, Mrs Yeo remains on heightened alert at 2.30pm almost every weekday when her daughter begins the two-hour commute home from Sengkang to Jurong West. For Cheryl, who is on the severe end of the autism spectrum, the journey spanning a staggering 26 stations can be a frightening expedition into the unknown.

“It’s very stressful. I cannot have a restful mind,” said Mrs Yeo. During this time, she is torn between work and her child. The database administrator’s attention would flit between managing databases, replying emails on the computer, and checking in for updates from her helper May on her phone.

“Sometimes, she cannot cope with the noise and people walking around her,” she added. That is when the screaming begins.

STAYING COOL WHEN THINGS HEAT UP

Beyond these occasional moments of anxiety, Mrs Yeo is typically a cool-headed mum. She has to be. Cheryl is not the only child she and her husband Mr Victor Yeo, 49, need to watch out for. Twin daughter Eunice is also moderately autistic.

> “We don’t have to give up everything because our children are special. We do what we can. We must stay happy and be grateful for each day. There are so many things we can be grateful for – life still goes on.”

With both unable to speak, it can get chaotic – especially when both sisters act out in unison when they experience heightened anxiety. They resort to guttural groans, wild gestures, and sometimes screams.

But this bubbly working mother of three children remains sanguine. She has a younger daughter who is neurotypical. “I can even work when they’re screaming,” she shared with a laugh.

Becoming Zen, however, was not easy. Like steel forged in fire, the struggles that have pockmarked the past two decades have transformed her into a seasoned caregiver of today.

Now, anticipating her daughters’ needs is almost second nature. To mitigate Cheryl’s MRT meltdowns for instance, Mrs Yeo devised a meticulous plan to keep her constantly preoccupied during the ride.

There’s a yellow handmade handbook for Cheryl to mark off every station that the train stops at, and headphones so she can listen to her favourite tunes from children’s YouTube channel CoComelon. Lastly, there is a reward in the form of a snack once they’ve reached the train station near their home.

Their helper May also keeps a card emblazoned with a QR code that contains Mrs Yeo’s contact details so that members of the public can reach out to her if necessary. “As parents of a child with special needs, we have to plan every single step to ensure a smooth transition,” she said.

FROM DEVASTATED PARENT TO DETERMINED MOTHER

The steady Mrs Yeo of today is a far cry from the wide-eyed, young parent who first discovered the heartbreaking news that her twins had autism 17 years ago, when they were 2.5 years old.

“I didn’t even know what autism was at that time,” she recalled. “I was feeling very bad, had to cope with the embarrassment from my relatives and didn’t dare to tell my friends.”

This humiliation was coupled with exasperation, as the learning curve in nurturing them was steep and often unknown. “There’s no manual to deal with them,” she said. “I didn’t know how to take care of them, so I would just scream and yell.”

Thankfully, help arrived in the form of her mother-in-law, Madam Teo Peck Hong, 72, who stepped in as their main caregiver. Joining parent support groups when the girls were 15 also helped her open up and share her issues. “There are many people who have walked this journey and many who are walking alongside us. We learn together,” she said.

And as her daughters grew, so did her own patience and resilience. “Previously, I was very short-tempered. I wanted things to be done in a certain way,” she said. “Now I stand in my girls’ shoes and think from the angle of how they process information. I’m much more patient.”

PARENTAL GUIDANCE: A DATING EDITION

This proactive mother is already looking ahead to future milestones, as her twins become young adults. She is even taking dating management workshops to prepare for the eventual possibility that they find love one day.

“My husband and mother-in-law think I’m funny,” she said. “But I see it as getting prepared so that we can handle it when it comes. I don’t want to suppress their feelings. As an adult, these are part and parcel of their life.”

While her life may be full of uncertainty, one thing is for sure: she is cherishing every moment of it. She has learnt to appreciate every progress, every step forward – no matter how small or how long it takes.

“My children scream all day, but I get used to it,” she said with a smile. “Be grateful for each day.” ▪

Mr Dennis Tan (left) conducting football training at Pathlight School for members of Autism Resource Centre (Singapore)'s Social and Leisure Club.

> "It is a chance for them to go out and enjoy the world like everyone else. And for the public, it is a chance for them to learn more about this community too."
>
> **Mr Dennis Tan**

A JOURNEY WORTH CONTINUING: FINDING JOY IN HELPING YOUTHS AND ADULTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Almost every Saturday morning, there are giggles and guffaws coming from the field at Pathlight School where a game of football is played. Smiling gleefully as they run after the ball, participants are learning how to interact with each other in a social activity.

For some of these participants of the Autism Resource Centre (Singapore)'s (ARC) Social and Leisure Club (SLC), it is the only time they get to play a team sport – and the only time they feel like they belong in a group.

"When the programme first started, one of the participants shared that this is the first time he's played soccer in a team. He was never chosen by his classmates in a mainstream school. This made him very happy," shared Mr Dennis Tan, 64, Programme Manager at ARC's Enrichment Programmes and SLC.

It was a poignant reminder that the things most people take for granted – such as social interactions and a sense of belonging – do not come easy for persons on the autism spectrum. This extends from childhood into adulthood, if they are not given sufficient opportunities to interact with others.

Mr Tan wanted to change that. Five years into his career at the ARC's Enrichment Unit, organising programmes like pottery and total fitness as part of after-school programmes, he was excited when tasked to start the SLC in 2010.

The SLC enables youths and adults on the autism spectrum to meet on a regular basis in a safe environment, offering opportunities to improve their social skills through sports and monthly outings. Open mainly to graduates of Pathlight School who may have difficulties finding friends, the SLC has a membership of more than 60 who attend the programme regularly.

"For many people on the autism spectrum, as they leave school, a significant number don't have as many opportunities to socialise because they don't have many friends," explained Mr Tan. "So SLC plays an integral role,

> **“People on the spectrum are uniquely real… what you see is what you get. It is like looking at a crystal clear beach. Unfiltered… they are honest, unpretentious, and spontaneous.”**

as it gives them the opportunity to meet up with ex-classmates or make new friends, even if it happens only once a week.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

It was not a smooth journey at the start. He recalls fighting many internal “battles”, such as gaining parental support especially when the activities involved bringing a large group of students to external camps.

Over the years, he has met parents who are hesitant to bring their children out, due to the fear that their children’s actions might draw disapproving stares and hurtful words from the public. While he understands their concerns, he believes that people on the autism spectrum have a place in society too.

“Why should we hide them away at home? It is a chance for them to go out and enjoy the world like everyone else. And for the public, it is a chance for them to learn more about this community too. This is what inclusiveness is about,” he said.

Dennis recalls one incident at McDonald’s a few years ago. As his members were being too rowdy at the fast-food restaurant, a well-meaning patron suggested they get their food to go – to prevent disrupting others’ meals. This was not a one-off case.

But he does not let these reactions get to him. “I have pretty thick skin. That’s one thing you need to have to thrive in this line of work, and this is needed to close the inclusiveness gap with the public,” he said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused some disruptions to the club’s activities. “We had to cease all activities when the safety measures were implemented. We have recently re-started the activities on 12 February (2022),” he recalled.

But he knew the SLC was doing something good when it was missed. “A lot of parents and members kept texting us, asking us when we will open again,” he revealed with a smile, adding that age is no barrier. The oldest member is 51.

A THICK-SKIN AND PATIENT HEART

Formerly an operations manager in the corporate sector, Mr Tan made a career switch in 2005. He joined the ARC, a non-profit organisation that supports persons on the autism spectrum through advocacy and has not looked back for a single moment.

“After being here for 17 years, I still wake up every morning feeling happy and excited to go to work,” he said.

Today, he runs the ARC Enrichment team with a lean team of two staff and a group of volunteers who are mainly students from schools who have a partnership with ARC. As for the SLC, he works with a team of dedicated volunteers who serve with passion.

He continues to be on a lookout for more people to join the cause – those with a big heart, thick skin and lots of patience.

“The key to working with people on the autism spectrum is patience, as some have obsessions and repetitive behaviours that can go on for years. If you have no patience or you are easily upset with them, then you will find it hard to survive in this job,” he shared candidly.

Gesturing at the field, he explained: “We have been running this football programme for years, yet the game remains challenging for them. But it certainly teaches them basic skills, gets them active and gives them joy.”

It is this joy that keeps him going, to see more persons on the autism spectrum find happiness as well as help the public understand that these individuals are deserving of the same opportunities open to the rest of society. ▪

Darius (middle) celebrating his birthday with family.

> “I run to keep myself healthy so I can take care of Darius for as long as I can. I want to reach the finishing line with Darius.
>
> **Mr Winson Koh**

CARING FOR OUR SON ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM IS A MARATHON, BUT WILL WE BE THERE AT THE FINISH LINE?

As Ms Andrea Tan sinks into her sofa and switches on her smart television, foreign characters appear on the YouTube interface. The language settings were in Spanish.

The electronics engineer gets over her bewilderment quickly, having come to expect the unexpected in the Koh household. “Darius, please set the language back to English,” she tells her 14-year-old son with a laugh.

While Spanish is deeply unfamiliar to Ms Tan and most Singaporeans, Darius immerses himself in it, writing and reciting it. He can also count in French and Hebrew, all self-taught via YouTube.

In his room, puzzles – of the English alphabet as well as shapes and colours – are placed across two foam mats. In the corner, an iPad plays a counting song on repeat, and Darius sings along with his mother as he alternates between fixing jigsaw pieces and placing one finger on the YouTube play button.

He cannot speak in full sentences, but strings together enough words to ask Ms Tan to sing more songs with him. While he is not attuned to most social cues, he initiates a “hello” and a wave with people he is familiar with, such as neighbours and family members.

“Basically, he is like a five-year-old trapped in a 14-year-old’s body,” said Ms Tan, as she goes on to describe how her son on the autism spectrum has no awareness of road dangers.

WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

When Singapore was thrust into a two-month circuit breaker during the pandemic in April 2020, the term “home-based learning” entered the education lexicon. However, it was a misnomer to Darius.

In his eyes, his home in Punggol is all about fun while school is in Lorong Napiri, where he attends AWWA School, a special education institute.

His father, Mr Winson Koh, struggled to supervise him on school days from 9am to 3pm. “I had to occupy him every minute,” said Mr Koh, who had to guide a distracted Darius through everything from Mathematics and English comprehension assignments to stretching exercises.

> “Individuals on the autism spectrum, though some may be non-verbal or have different takes on social interactions, are all hoping to be accepted by the people around them.”
>
> **Ms Andrea Tan**

Then came the meltdowns. Darius tends to throw his belongings or bang on tables when he is restless. His parents, who are both 48, would respond differently. Ms Tan usually waits until Darius calms down before engaging him; Mr Koh remains close, poised to enfold him in a bear hug to prevent the adolescent from hurting himself.

Work took a back seat for Mr Koh, who is self-employed in the construction and engineering sector. “COVID-19 taught us a lot of things. My business slowed down but it turned out to be a blessing as I spent more time with Darius and got to know him better,” he shared.

IT’S A MARATHON

Unlike his neurotypical peers, Darius cannot take public transport independently and has to be accompanied by his father, his chaperone. His mother is his playmate who reads and sings him to sleep.

The early morning journey to school comprises two bus rides and a short walk that takes 45 minutes in total. At the gate, Mr Koh lingers for a few minutes to ensure that Darius makes it safely to his classroom. Sometimes, Darius turns back and waves.

After that, Mr Koh, an avid ultramarathoner who has completed 50km races, jogs back home, a run that covers 10km to 12km. “It’s my ‘me time’ to destress, but even while running, I’m still worrying about him,” explained Mr Koh, who usually dreads phone calls from the school for fear of bad news about Darius. Once, they had gotten a call as he had hurt himself.

In the afternoon, a school bus drops Darius off at a special needs student care centre in Bishan, and Mr Koh makes the hour-long journey from Punggol to pick him up at 5pm. Then, it’s dinner at NEX shopping centre or Mr Koh’s parents’ home in Serangoon, or the Bishan interchange coffeeshop.

Sometimes, strangers approach Mr Koh in public when Darius involuntarily makes loud noises to self-regulate. They ask him to “control his son”.

“I tell them ‘I’m sorry, my boy is autistic’,” he recounted with a resigned shrug.

THE FINISH LINE

While the Kohs have come to terms with Darius’ condition, it was not easy when he was diagnosed at around 2.5 years old. Detailed check-ups lasting two to three hours each time, coupled with a lack of understanding of the condition, made for an emotional and frustrating experience.

Soon, the couple started spending up to $3,000 a month on Darius’ speech and occupational therapy sessions as well as medical fees, on top of the cost of hiring a domestic helper to help care for Darius. It was a tremendous financial burden, but they got by with family support.

While their expenses are lower now as his condition has improved and they no longer need a helper, worries persist. They fear the day they are no longer around for Darius, their only child. Their biggest concerns are his physical safety and financial independence – worries that have no easy resolution.

“When it comes to our plans for his future, we sometimes avoid discussing more. Not because we are not worried, but we know very well in our hearts that there are limitations to what we can do for him,” said Ms Tan.

For Mr Koh, the race is never-ending. “I run to keep myself healthy so I can take care of Darius for as long as I can. I want to reach the finishing line with Darius. I really *fang bu xia* (cannot let go).” ▪


Afzam (third from left) celebrating his cousin's birthday.

> “I soon realised that the years of experience I gained was all meant for Afzam… With my background, I knew how to communicate effectively with him and how to better schedule his days.”
>
> **Mr Ahmad Asrorie**

WHY I QUIT MY JOB: FROM SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATOR TO CAREGIVER FOR MY SON ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

“The Samsung Galaxy A20 is the best, but it stopped running Android 11 and needs custom ROM,” uttered Ahmad Fathuzzaman Ahmad Asrorie, with the easy confidence of a seasoned sales staff.

But Ahmad Fathuzzaman, also called Afzam, was not selling anything. He was sitting at his dining table in his Sengkang home, explaining every technical detail of his collection of 15 smartphones and two tablets, many of them used or discarded by his family members. He is also only 10 years old.

“Most kids his age love going to playgrounds,” said Afzam's father, Mr Ahmad Asrorie, 44. “But Afzam's favourite places are Harvey Norman and Challenger.”

In true tech enthusiast fashion, he also reviews his electronic devices by filming videos.

“I will always need to check and edit his videos as I do not want him to accidentally leak any personal information in them,” said Mr Ahmad. “It is a concern as he is not shy around strangers and even picks up unknown calls.”

Afzam's sociable nature can be surprising to many, as he is on the autism spectrum. But he has his own set of challenges, such as a lack of social awareness – of danger or being disruptive in class when he failed to follow teachers' instructions during pre-school.

AUTISM DOES NOT ALWAYS EQUAL ALOOF

Afzam was officially diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old, but Mr Ahmad suspected that something was different as early as when he was just six months old.

“It seemed like he had some kind of learning disability and he did not understand why he had to do certain things,” he shared. “However, on the spectrum, he seems to require a little bit less support.”

Currently in his third year at AWWA School @ Napiri, a special education school, Afzam excels in interacting with his peers. He is always ready to lend his classmates a helping hand and will actively assist his

> “My background in special needs education does not make caregiving easier. Previously, it was about passion. Now, it is about ensuring that everything works out for Afzam. Instead of passion, it is now pressure.”

friends with tasks that they are struggling with.

With family, Afzam is no different. “When we go out with his cousins and he sees one of them lagging behind, he will always go to them,” said Mr Ahmad.

He also regularly helps his grandparents with chores when he goes to their home after school daily – an arrangement that has made caring for Afzam currently more manageable for his parents.

But this support system is a far cry from what the family had four years ago.

CHANGING CAREER: A PAINFUL BUT NECESSARY DECISION

When Afzam was six and about to start school properly, his paternal grandparents fell ill and were no longer able to take care of him. His parents scrambled to find alternative care arrangements.

“We tried to get him a place in a special needs student care centre, but there was a limited number of them, and they were all filled up,” recalled Mr Ahmad.

Between him and his wife, they came to a decision that he would quit his job to care for Afzam. It was a practical decision: His wife earned more at her job in the pharmacy retail industry.

But it was also a tough call, as it meant giving up his career as a special needs educator at schools for over a decade. Yet, his job was also the reason that made him the perfect caregiver for Afzam.

“I soon realised that the years of experience I gained was all meant for Afzam,” he shared. “With my background, I knew how to communicate effectively with him and how to better schedule his days, which helped.”

He set up a daily routine for Afzam that provided predictability, as well as channelled his energies towards constructive hobbies like learning about electronics.

But no amount of experience could prepare him for how hard it was to be a caregiver. For two years, he went through a gruelling daily routine that saw his world turn upside down.

Working odd jobs at night, Mr Ahmad would return home only in the morning to take Afzam to school. These four hours of school were a brief respite, before focusing all his attention on Afzam when he came home. Then, he had a mere two to three hours of sleep before he had to work again.

“Honestly, I do not know how I survived. I wondered if leaving my job was the right decision,” said Mr Ahmad. “But I had to get my priorities straight and think of how I could best support my son.”

A CALL FOR GREATER SUPPORT

Thankfully, Afzam’s grandparents eventually recovered and took over the caregiving role. Mr Ahmad now has a full-time job as an operations executive at an education enrichment company with a STEM and ICT focus, but still spends time with his son.

“I recently introduced Afzam to online games like *Minecraft Education Edition* and *Roblox*, which we regularly play together,” he said. “I am also teaching him how to edit videos.”

He hopes for greater support for persons on the autism spectrum and their caregivers in Singapore. “I am lucky because I have experience as a special needs educator, but what about other parents who are clueless about autism?” noted Mr Ahmad.

“There also needs to be more after-school care centres for students with special needs, so that no other parent has to go through what I did.” ▪

Mr Elliot Chia with his digital drawing tablet.

> “I tried to be more independent and not use my autism as an excuse for anything… I wanted to improve my behaviour and work ethic.”
>
> **Mr Elliot Chia**

FROM FEAR TO CONFIDENCE – HOW THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT HELPED A PERSON ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM SOAR

For nearly six months, Elliot Chia hunted and waited. In his search for full-time work as an animator, he had sent over 20 job applications that led to just four interviews.

“Either my portfolio was inadequate or I didn’t stand out during interviews,” he shared matter-of-factly.

Finally, he managed to land a job at a digital animation studio for three months. “It’s a start,” said Elliot, 26, who graduated from Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Animation.

For many, this long job search can be dispiriting. For the soft-spoken Elliot, there’s an added insecurity.

“I felt bad about possibly being overlooked in favour of more charismatic and knowledgeable people who are better at advocating for themselves,” he said. He wondered if employers were shunning him because he is on the spectrum.

So when he received his first job offer, he was elated – that he was appreciated for who he is and his talent. He opened up to his supervisor, sharing that he has autism and requires “very specific instructions and frequent clarifications” to produce the best work.

“He was willing to accommodate me,” he disclosed with a shy smile.

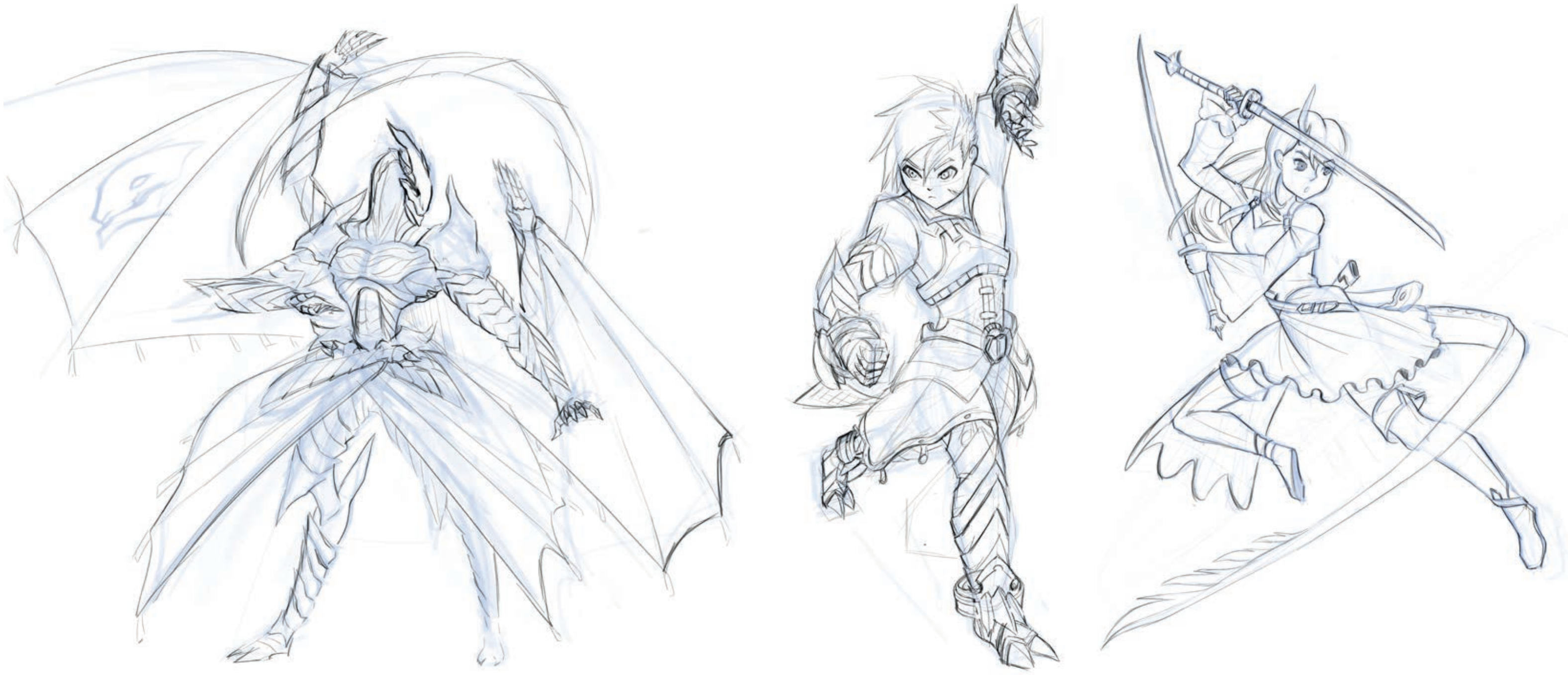
DRAWING INSPIRATION: “I WANTED TO BRING MY IDEAS TO LIFE”

His talent is clear. From drawing to designing to animating, Elliot’s masterpieces can be viewed on ArtStation, an online portfolio portal.

There are vivid illustrations of Japanese anime characters, intricate sketches of pandas and manatees inspired by Singapore’s River Wonders, and technical demonstrations of rigging – an animation process that allows characters to move.

His digital magic and imaginative touch has even transformed Nintendo’s iconic Mario from pudgy plumber to rugged Rambo – with some tweaks to hairstyle and attire. “I can even make him run too,” he grinned, playing a short clip of his 3D crossover creation sprinting at full speed.

Creating animated characters is his childhood dream come true, as he was mesmerised by Pokémon and



> “I’m grateful, but I still want to do more. These are stepping stones to what I want to do in life. It’s good to have gone so far already.”

Gundam. “Watching all these different shows made me want to do my own shows. I wanted to bring my ideas to life,” he said.

While cartoons sparked his creativity and career, his current achievements have not come easy.

A DAILY DREAD: “JUST BEING AWAKE WAS TIRING”

As a person on the autism spectrum with lower support needs, Elliot has had to deal with social difficulties such as communicating and echolalia – where he randomly repeated words from previously watched videos when he was much younger.

Recounting the past, he shared how he used to feel trapped in fear during his days at a mainstream primary school. Having been diagnosed with autism at age six, his limitations in communicating often meant trouble.

“Sometimes I didn’t know I was doing the wrong thing or was being socially inappropriate. So I got scolded a lot,” he recalled.

There was an instance where he was headed for the counsellor’s office, which was located in a restricted zone for students. But when a teacher asked what he was doing there, he could not give a proper answer. The misunderstanding resulted in punishment – he was forced to sit in a corner for an entire recess.

The frequent scolding, which happened every month, eventually took a toll. “I was getting sadder and sadder. I didn’t enjoy learning,” he said. “I was just too sad to comprehend what the teachers were saying. I wanted the day to be over – just being awake was tiring.”

GETTING A DEGREE: “MY GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT”

A lifeline came in a transfer to Pathlight School, which brought instant liberation. “I definitely felt more relaxed,” he said. “If I did something wrong, I would be corrected, not scolded.”

Being at ease also helped his fledgling artistic flair to shine. He joined the school’s Artist Development Programme, working with professional artists to develop his talent. From there, he blossomed, eventually pursuing a Diploma in (Digital) Animation at a local polytechnic.

This time, the lessons learnt from Pathlight helped him adjust better in a mainstream school. He was more conscious of his actions. Finding something he was good at and making friends bolstered his confidence too.

He kept on progressing. In 2017, he entered university – but with mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety as it was a big challenge.

“I tried to be more independent and not use my autism as an excuse for anything,” he explained. “I wanted to improve my behaviour and work ethic.”

Although he still found it tough to talk to people, he mustered the courage to approach teachers about work. Like in polytechnic, a close circle of friends helped him adapt to university life. He graduated in 2021, a moment he describes as his “greatest achievement”.

CONVERSATION CHALLENGE: “JUST TRY”

After conquering school and getting a job, Elliot is now facing his next greatest challenge: communicating effectively in the working world.

While he has excelled in his individual pursuits, he is finding it a little harder to be part of a team or joining group conversations. But he is taking action. “I just don’t think too much about it and just try,” he explained.

It is working. In the first week at his new job, he managed to hold a conversation with a pair of colleagues. “It wasn’t a very long conversation but it was still good in my opinion,” he said.

As with all his previous challenges, he will eventually prevail. He always has. ▪

Mr Sarayanan Mariappa enjoying a run along Kallang River.

> “I had to change my mindset and understand him better. I got more competent. He was communicating to me all the while but I just didn’t understand it.”
>
> **Mr Sarayanan Mariappa**

BEATEN AND BITTEN, BUT NOT BROKEN – STAYING THE COURSE, CHAMPIONING THE CAUSE

Just a year into his role as a training officer at the Autism Youth Centre (now known as Eden Centre for Adults), Mr Sarayanan Mariappa sat at the doctor’s, not for the first time that month. Pain radiated from the deep bite marks on his arm as he awaited his tetanus jab.

What he felt more acutely, however, were the aching thoughts of dejection nagging at him. He had seen little progress with his client, John (not his real name), who had once again bitten and scratched him in a meltdown.

“Should I stay here? I’m getting attacked. Can I sustain this in the long run?” Mr Sarayanan thought to himself. The job had been taking a huge toll on his mental health as he faced the day-to-day challenges of caring for persons on the autism spectrum.

Yet, more than 22 years later, he remains in the industry, having learnt how to cope with such challenges with the support of colleagues. “You help one another, you lean on one another, and just move on,” he said.

Today, the sprightly 50-year-old is Head of Programmes at Eden Centre for Adults, as well as Head of Centre for the Clementi branch. The centre was created in 2010 as a day activity centre for adults on the autism spectrum, and has 88 beneficiaries across two locations.

For Mr Sarayanan, it has been a long but meaningful process of learning to build relationships with his beneficiaries.

LEARNING COMMUNICATION CUES

His early experience with John was a make-or-break moment in his career. He recounts how he eagerly agreed to work with John, who was on the severe end of the spectrum – believing that he could get a breakthrough.

His optimism was perhaps naiveté, as he could not get through initially – suffering some physical attacks along the way. But he persevered, and slowly made headway.

> "You must have a mindset of taking things easy and accept the challenges as part of the job. Go in every day thinking 'Anything that will go wrong, will go wrong', and when everything goes smoothly, you are very happy!"

"I had to change my mindset and understand him better. I got more competent. He was communicating to me all the while but I just didn't understand it," he said.

Through close observation, he managed to detect tell-tale signs of when John – who was non-verbal – would become angry and turn violent. John would make a "shhhhh" sound.

"Every client communicates behaviour in a certain way and if you are alert, you will know how to work with them. You will know when to push (them to do activities) and when to pull back," he explained.

"He is one client who taught me more about autism in one week than I could learn in years."

LEADING WITH JOY

Mr Sarayanan is now immersed in the world of persons on the autism spectrum. He enthusiastically joins in activities with them at his centre, even though he does not have to – his job entails planning, rather than participating, in the programmes.

"It gives me happiness to be with the clients," he said, sharing how he would join them for gym training and swimming, according to the pandemic guidelines of the day.

It is also his way of encouraging younger colleagues who face the same struggles he had in the early years, showing them that the job is both fulfilling and fun. "I have to create the culture and be the example," said Mr Sarayanan, who has 24 staff in two centres who are called coaches.

These coaches guide the beneficiaries through the day's activities, which are tailored to suit their individual needs. Under Mr Sarayanan's charge, the two adult centres aim to offer a more customised combination of programmes such as cooking, physical activities, and art and craft.

He is thrilled when parents share that their children are making progress by doing things they would not do at home, whether it is cooking a dish or striking an exercise pose.

"They will say 'Oh, he will never do this at home!'", he said, laughing. "That always makes us happy."

BE PRACTICAL, NOT EMOTIONAL

His job is also full of sobering moments, such as when parents of adult children come to him at a loss.

He recalls how a single mother recently came to him sobbing as her adult son, in his early 30s, simply could not sit still on the van bringing him to the centre. This meant she had to take him there herself – an immensely distressing experience as she could not control him.

"She was really breaking down and at the point of depression," shared Mr Sarayanan, who added that his coaches are now helping her son adjust to social rules in the vehicle.

While he used to be deeply affected by such scenarios previously, he has since steeled himself – a slow transformation that came with years of experience.

"I used to feel very sad and disappointed if I couldn't find a solution and it affected me when I went home. But if we are going to be sad with the parents, it's not going to help. I have to think practically and find answers," he said.

Some answers remain elusive, but Mr Sarayanan presses on. "We are realising what needs to be done, and it's a work in progress. That motivates me to keep going," he said. ▪


Mrs Rasidah Namboka sharing a lighthearted moment with her granddaughter at Rainbow Centre.

> “Sofie has helped me finetune things. For example, you can hear things, but are you listening? She taught me that.”

Mrs Rasidah Namboka
Chair of From One Parent to Another (FOPtA)

RAISING SOFIE: IT TAKES A VILLAGE, AND SOME FRENCH FRIES

It was a social experiment that resulted in sweet success. For two weeks in 2018, Mrs Rasidah Namboka brought her 7-year-old granddaughter on the autism spectrum to the Swensen’s outlet at Sun Plaza every day. The frequency then reduced to once a month.

These outings were not just a time of bonding for her and Tyra Sofieya, or Sofie to her loved ones. They were also part of her tireless efforts to get Sofie to feel comfortable going out and being in a social setting.

“I started with Swensen’s and told them, ‘Whatever Sofie breaks, I will pay. If she makes a mess, pass me the broom and I will clean up’,” explained the 56-year-old.

“I said, ‘If you just help me, I can promise you that I’ll bring my whole family and you’ll have an additional 12 people here every month’.”

The restaurant was more than willing to help. They were given the same table 14, right at the back of the restaurant. And they always ordered the same food – French fries.

“Straight cut, crinkle cut, curly fries then steak cut. Always in that order. We would order one type first. If it was unavailable, we would go down the list,” she shared, smiling at the memory.

Soon, the rest of the family joined the meal. Everyone enjoyed the dining out experience, especially little Sofie who eagerly looked forward to the treat.

Sofie did not say anything, as she is almost non-verbal, but her eyes spoke – sparkling like jewels, living up to her nickname, *intan nani*, which translates to grandma’s jewel.

WHEN THERE IS RESISTANCE

Mrs Namboka, who had a brief stint working with children with special needs, first noticed signs that Sofie was different when she was only nine-months old.

“At first, I thought she was hearing-impaired. When we called her name, she wouldn’t reply. But when the doorbell rang, she was quick to react,” she recalled. “So I thought she could be on the spectrum.”

But she did not know how to break the news to her mother and daughter. When she did, they were not happy

> “We’re all going in the same direction, except some of us might be travelling in different types of vessels – some faster, some slower.”

and resisted sending Sofie for a diagnosis.

When Sofie was five, she fell sick and was taken to the hospital. While everyone else was distracted by Sofie’s cries, Mrs Namboka saw it as a blessing in disguise.

“I had a 20-minute window when I was alone with the doctor. I said, ‘Please, I think my granddaughter might be on the spectrum. Can you give me a referral letter so she can be officially diagnosed?’”

Armed with the doctor’s note and a newfound sense of purpose, she approached her daughter once more to enrol Sophie in a school for special needs children. “I wanted to get Sofie the help she needed as soon as possible,” she said.

Slowly, the rest of the family began to accept Sofie’s condition. Today, Sofie’s 76-year-old great-grandmother (Mrs Namboka’s mother) focuses on her daily needs like showering and meals, while her grandmother helps with her learning. Sofie’s mother takes care of her younger sister, who is also on the autism spectrum.

Mrs Namboka uses tools such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to guide 11-year-old Sofie in communicating her needs and wants, as she does not speak.

If people are unable to understand her, frustration sets in – but she does not kick up a fuss like most kids as she has extended legs – a condition that causes her to struggle with bending her legs fully. This makes her unable to jump up and down or roll on the floor to exhibit her unhappiness. “Instead, when she has a meltdown, she hits and bites herself,” Mrs Namboka shared.

INCENTIVES AND SELF-DOUBTS

The Swensen’s experiment is not the only routine that Mrs Namboka has devised to help Sofie cope with everyday life.

From walking to the nearby post office to enjoy the air-conditioning to visiting the Singapore Discovery Centre to see the lights, she always offers Sofie incentives to make their trips more manageable.

“Whenever we want to go out, I always check the route on Google Maps. Then I start to plan checkpoints. We will stop for bubbles, flowers, anything Sofie likes. This makes it easier for us to reach the end point,” she said.

Similarly, when Sofie suddenly refused to attend classes two years after enrolling in Rainbow Centre Admiral Hill School, Mrs Namboka came up with another creative approach to get her back in school.

“I told the principal at Rainbow Centre to give me three months and Sofie would be ready for school again. It’s about doing things in stages and giving incentives,” she explained.

So for two weeks in 2021, she had Sofie wave to her teacher from the taxi. The following week, she got her to exit the taxi and greet 10 people at the school. Day by day, Mrs Namboka would add an additional step to the routine. Within three months, Sofie entered the school and was able to participate in class activities again. Even though she did not stay till the end of the school day, she was grinning as she came down the stairs and headed for home. The day was a success.

But even the confident Mrs Namboka is haunted by self-doubts. There were countless nights when she would lay in bed awake, wondering if what she’s doing for Sofie is right and whether she should leave the caregiving to the teachers instead.

“I spoke to myself, to the walls, to a scooter…I spoke to everything and anything that would listen to me and not answer. I needed to reconcile and tell myself not to be drawn to all these negative thoughts,” she said.

Over time, Mrs Namboka believes her granddaughter has taught her valuable life lessons. For instance, she now finds herself more empathetic and less judgemental.

“Sofie has helped me finetune things. For example, you can hear things, but are you listening? She taught me that,” she said. ▪

Owen with his sister, Kaiyi.

> “I want people to know that people on the autism spectrum are just like us, it’s just that they communicate in a different manner. They are not weird or strange or stupid.
>
> **Owen’s mum**

THE REASON I WRITE: “I CAN’T SPEAK BUT HEAR ME THROUGH MY LETTERS”

**Owen’s story, as shared through his letters and mother*

Do you sometimes feel you have so much to say but can’t find the words for it? That’s me, but all the time. My name is Owen Liu, and I don’t speak. It’s not that I don’t want to, I just can’t.

My parents told me I spoke my first words as a toddler but stopped suddenly one day when I was 2.5 years old. Doctors later said I’m on the moderate autism spectrum.

People say that makes me special. I don’t understand what they mean because I feel completely normal. Unless they mean I’m special because I have an awesome family – then they are right!

As a child, I could only point, pull on the hands of those caring for me, or use a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) that comprises picture cards with words to communicate. It was hard to get people to understand me and sometimes that made me very frustrated.

There was one time my anxiety got the better of me and I bit my sister Kaiyi on the cheek. It even drew blood and left a mark! I was so sorry after that. But being the wonderful sister she is, she forgave me.

Before I turned 10, I also had a tough time winding down and needed to be constantly on the move. I only felt calm being pushed on a pram or taken on a drive. My patient parents and *Kakaks* (auntie in Bahasa Indonesia) would take turns bringing me out, even in the early morning. They often wondered why I never got tired. I wonder too.

Things improved as I got older. I started to take prescribed medication that helped me to sleep at night and keep me calm in the day. I was able to attend classes at St Andrew Autism School where I got to strengthen my social and motor skills, and tried my hand at activities like art and craft.

But the most awesome thing happened four years ago. I made an unexpected breakthrough – I started to write! I was at an occupational therapy session and was feeling a little glum that day. My long-time therapist asked if I was

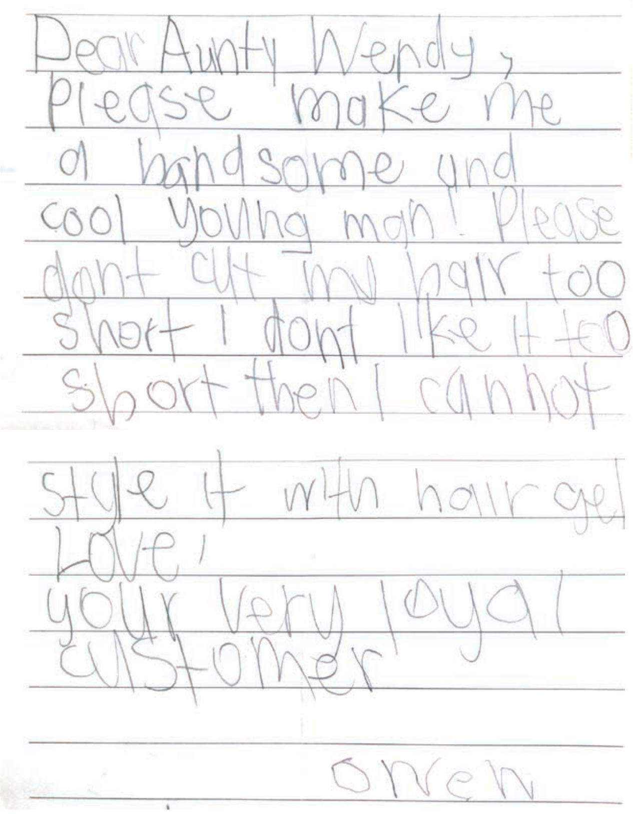
> “Owen is not able to talk so some people think that he’s dumb but actually he’s not. People like him are just different but they have needs and feelings just like the rest of us.”

feeling okay and I scribbled my first word on the chalkboard – sad.

I started to write more and more. Words became phrases, phrases became sentences, and soon I was writing letters. Finally, I could tell my family and those around me what I felt or wanted!

I told my parents I wanted an English name because all my friends had one, and that I didn’t find my given name Kai’en cool. They gave me a few options – Oliver, Owen, Samuel and Shawn. And that is how I became Owen. I heard that my mum is secretly happy because it sounds like Kai’en!

I also got the hairstyle I always wanted. For years my mum thought that going to the hair salon made me anxious, so she would ask Aunty Wendy, my regular hairstylist, to cut my hair very short. But I actually wanted it long enough to style with hair gel. I wrote a letter to Aunty Wendy and now I get the haircut of my choice monthly.



Dear Aunty Wendy,
Please make me
a handsome and
cool young man! Please
dont cut my hair too
short I dont like it too
short then I cannot
style it with hair gel
Love,
your very loyal
customer

Owen

Through my letters, I was able to share more and more with my family – things like my love for Japan and that I aspire to be a food and travel writer. My dad tells me the flight to Japan is seven hours, so I’ve been training hard to sit still and wait in the queue for long periods. This is not easy for me.

I have been very anxious the last two years because of COVID-19. Each time I take the ART, I wonder if I am going to get COVID-19! Luckily, Mummy is very gentle when doing the test with me. And phew, I haven’t tested positive yet.

Today I’m 18 and just like you, I get excited about going out with my family, eating good food and visiting places I like, and feeling restless when I have to wait.

But it’s harder for me to contain my emotions. When I’m happy I want to stamp my feet or run around in the crowd, and when I’m not, I might shout. My dad tells me that the public might not like it, so I try to stop myself. Once, we were at Jewel Changi Airport to meet him (he is a pilot) and I got so excited that I started stamping my feet and running. He was not happy, but I didn’t know how to control myself. Luckily, Daddy forgave me.

But the next time you see a cool-looking dude running around in the crowd or making funny noises, that might be me. Just know that I am just expressing myself.

These days I’m starting to vocalise certain words again. I’ve said the word toilet, mummy and happy. It is exciting! I’m not sure what’s in store for me in the future but my parents tell me not to rush.

For now, I’ll rely on my trusty Boogie Board writing tablet, pen and paper to communicate. I can’t speak but I hope you hear me through my writings. ▪

Owen with his mother.

Aqram polishes his favourite pair of boots.

> “Even though we have three children with special needs, my wife and I stay positive and are coping well because we love them.”
>
> **Mr Mohammad Yazed M Affandee**

WHY I WEAR COMBAT BOOTS EVERY DAY

Instead of Netflix dramas, Muhammad Aqram Bin Mohd Yazed watches YouTube videos of the Malaysian Royal Malay Regiment in their full-dress drills as a pastime – admiring their smart uniforms, complete with elegant *sarongs* and headgear.

And rather than sneakers, the 24-year-old prefers his trusty pair of combat boots, which he wears daily and describes as “my treasure”. “In Singapore, I see army boys wearing boots. I am also wearing such boots,” he said with a tinge of pride.

But Aqram is not in the same shoes as his male peers, for whom National Service is a rite of passage. As a person on the autism spectrum, he was exempted from serving in the army.

FINDING HIS FEET

Before he was diagnosed, Aqram struggled to cope in school. His teachers, who were unaware of his condition, thought he was not trying hard enough and often reprimanded him.

“When his teacher asked him questions, he would give answers that were off-topic and irrelevant,” said Aqram’s father, Mr Mohammad Yazed M Affandee, 57. Aqram was diagnosed only in Primary 5, when a teacher noticed something was amiss and advised his parents to seek professional help.

“To this day, he still has difficulties answering questions and speaks in short phrases,” said Mr Yazed.

Aqram was then transferred to Eden School, a school for persons on the autism spectrum, which gave him the care, attention and education that mainstream schools could not.

After graduating from Eden School in end-2016, Aqram was sent for employment training at Enabling Village, an inclusive facility for persons with special needs. He was trained in hydroponic gardening and grew vegetables, like *kai lan* and *tang oh*, which are sold to restaurants.

He was then hired by Edible Garden City in Queenstown, where he has been working as a Junior Urban Farmer for the last four years.

DILIGENT, DISCIPLINED AND DEPENDABLE

Like the plants that he tenderly cares for, Aqram has

> "When Aqram was diagnosed with autism, I was okay with it and just faced the fact. Yes, he has this condition, but life goes on. I will always look on the positive side. So what if he is autistic? He is independent, can still learn and is developing well."

blossomed and is now an independent, responsible and disciplined young man.

Every weekday at 7am, he takes an hour-long MRT ride from his Marsiling home to his workplace on his own. Though he has long memorised the route, he always stays vigilant, standing throughout the journey in his precious boots with eyes glued to the MRT map.

"Even though I have travelled many times independently along this route, I will try to be alert so that I do not miss my stop," he explained.

At work, Aqram is equally meticulous and boasts a strong work ethic. "Work is sometimes very stressful, and I have much to do, but I definitely enjoy it," he said with a smile.

"I make sure to follow the instructions given to me. When I am unsure, I will ask questions and communicate, which is important – I do not want to do things wrongly and disappoint my colleagues."

"So far, he is doing well at work," added Mr Yazed. "There has not been any negative feedback from his supervisor."

Aqram, who makes $700 a month, is proud of his independence. "I now earn a salary and give it to my father," he said. "I also occasionally treat myself when I go shopping at Geylang Serai once a month, buying things that I like."

CONQUERING ADVERSITY WITH LOVE

When his workday ends at 12.30pm, Aqram would have lunch on his own and visit the nearest public library to read and unwind before returning home at about 2pm. There, other responsibilities await him.

"My three brothers do not do chores, so I have to take care of the house," said Aqram. "For instance, I will wash the dishes and sweep the floor."

Of Aqram's three brothers, aged 25, 19 and 14, only the youngest is neurotypical. His eldest brother has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and his younger brother is also on the autism spectrum, with higher support needs.

The siblings do not interact much. But Mr Yazed, who has a background in IT, makes it a point to take the family out for lunch every weekend.

"Even though we have three children with special needs, my wife and I stay positive and are coping well because we love them," said Mr Yazed. "Neurotypical or not, they are still my children and deserve unconditional love."

EXPLORING NEW INTERESTS

Bolstered by the nurturing home environment, Aqram gives his best in all that he does and enjoys exploring new pursuits. A year ago, for instance, he became intrigued by word search puzzles.

"I have a talent for doing such puzzles," he said enthusiastically. "I am the first person in our family to have this talent. I got increasingly better at it and am now solving advanced levels."

He is also keen to explore public speaking, a skill which is challenging even for most neurotypical folks. His interest was sparked after a brief emcee stint at Eden School, for which he put aside his fears and poured in his heart and soul.

"I was selected by the school to emcee together with local celebrity Eunice Olsen. It was a very good experience, and I received a lot of praise," he recalled. "If I have the chance, I would like to do more public speaking."

He might not have had the chance to serve in the army. But Aqram clearly has the grit, guts and gumption that any military commander would value in his troops. ▪

Ms Clara Toh (middle) with her son, David (left) and her husband (right).

> “If you don’t show, you don’t say, you don’t teach – there is zero chance of success. I may try over and over again, maybe the absorption rate is very low compared to a neurotypical child, but it doesn’t matter, I got to try.
>
> **Ms Clara Toh**

A MOTHER’S TEACHING MANTRA: “NEVER CANNOT, BUT NOT YET”

Tucked in the corner of Ms Clara Toh’s living room is a peculiar piano keyboard. It does not only have the usual signature black and white keys, but also a handwritten alphabet letter on each of them denoting the musical note it plays.

Flip open the music books stacked nearby and you find mysterious numbers on the music scores, right under each note.

It is a method devised by Ms Toh, 53, and her son David’s piano teacher, to help the teenager with sight-reading. Instead of memorising musical notes and which key plays what, David follows the number sequence on the music sheet and plays the corresponding keys.

“Some pieces he can now play with both his left and right hands,” she declared proudly of her 18-year-old son who is on the moderate autism spectrum. Recently, he even participated in a pre-recorded piano recital on YouTube where he performed a 2-minute piece.

Ms Toh, a lawyer, actually cannot play the piano herself, having given up after just a few months of lessons as a teen. “It’s quite a struggle to convert the notes sometimes, but what to do, David likes the piano,” she said with a joking shrug.

David, who was diagnosed when he was three, does not speak much and has a limited vocabulary. He also had trouble moving steadily from one point to another when he was younger, due to weak core muscles and underdeveloped coordination skills. But that has never stopped Ms Toh from teaching him new things, even sports.

BABY STEPS: BUT DON’T GIVE UP

Over the years, Ms Toh, who loves the outdoors, has exposed David to swimming, cycling, dragonboating and even paddle boarding.

Sports have been their way to bond, such as through fortnightly cycling trips around the nearby park, and also serve to expend David’s endless flow of energy. With the help of coaches and family friends, David has

> **“The last thing I want is to put limitations on my child and tell him you can’t do it, mummy do it for you.”**

become proficient in many sports.

While some might argue that such skills are frivolous and that she should focus her efforts on more practical ones, she believes that building David’s repertoire of skills will make him more confident. “Everyone deserves to feel good about themselves,” she said.

Besides, save for some knocks and bruises, physical skills are relatively easy to teach. Social and life skills, right and wrong – now those are harder to sink in, shared Ms Toh. This is still something that she constantly grapples with.

As a child, David used to throw items out the window of their 21st-storey apartment, from toys to household items. Despite repeated reminders not to, he continued with his “experiments” as he wanted to know how things fall.

So, to prevent people from getting hurt, Ms Toh had to cover up the gaps in the window grills. Eventually she had to lock the rubbish chute too because he also started to throw things down from it, including an expensive two-month-old camera. It is also for this reason that the family currently lives on the first floor, though David has since outgrown this phase.

Now, as a teenager, David is still not quite attuned to social cues. For instance, if he accidentally steps on someone on public transport and gets shot angry glares, he might not notice and will not apologise until prompted or confronted.

But there have been successes. Once, David shattered his iPad mini but instead of chiding him, Ms Toh decided to set up a ‘Repair iPad Fund’, where he would do chores in exchange for $1 a day. After two months, she realised he was wiping the table and sweeping without being asked.

As David is an only child with no siblings to contend with, Ms Toh has been deliberate in ensuring that he considers the wants of others, such as at meals. Now, whenever he has taken his share of food and wants more, he will ask if anyone else wants it first.

He is also now more sensitive towards other people’s feelings instead of always wanting his way. “When he senses I’m upset, he will feed me something,” said Ms Toh with a chuckle.

SHIFTING GOALS: DON’T BE AFRAID TO ADJUST

While Ms Toh’s goal was for David to travel independently by the time he turned 12, he still requires supervision today. When using pedestrian crossings, he tends to follow the people ahead blindly without checking if the green man is still on. He also loses concentration easily and has gotten lost a few times.

But she believes he will eventually get there. Her attitude has always been not to rush things. Whenever she senses he is not ready, she would pause, wait for a few months, then go back to teaching him.

This was how she eventually potty-trained David, who used to tense up whenever he sat on the toilet bowl. Today, he still uses the “1, 2, break” cue to decide on how much toilet paper to tear.

Although she knows David is unlikely to respond to her in words, or perhaps just not yet, she continues to talk to him about her day and how she feels, and comments on his likes, dislikes and feelings. And she is always keen to introduce him to new experiences.

“If you don’t show, you don’t say, you don’t teach – there is zero chance of success. I may try over and over again, maybe the absorption rate is very low compared to a neurotypical child, but it doesn’t matter, I got to try. Something probably goes through,” said Ms Toh. ▪

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