

# THROUGH THE EYES OF LOVE

A mother's love and foresight bears artistic fruit in her autistic son.

BY RUTH WONG

At a glance, Yeak Ping Lian, 14, looks ordinary. A handsome teenager with dark piercing eyes, Ping Lian attends Sydney's Vern Barnett School during the day. And when he is home, he draws, surfs the Internet, watches TV occasionally, and listens to music.

But his mother Sarah Lee knew Ping Lian was different, even as a toddler. Sarah suspected something was amiss as Ping Lian was not like his two older sisters. Not only was his verbal communication limited, he was also hyperactive and did not need much sleep. But what worried Sarah more was the fact that he showed no affection for people around him. "I would call him but I would not be able to get his attention. It was as if I was transparent to him," Sarah said in an e-mail interview.

When he was four, Sarah knew she couldn't wait anymore and had him diagnosed. The verdict confirmed Sarah's suspicions – Ping Lian was found to be autistic with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Autism spectrum disorder is a brain development disorder, which results in three distinctive behaviours. Autistic children have difficulty with

social interaction, problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviours or narrow, obsessive interests.

Sarah remembers feeling very upset when she first heard the news. She recounted, "I asked God, 'Why me? What have I done wrong to deserve this?'"

The early years were tough for the family. Ping Lian's hyperactive behaviour and sleeplessness put a strain on everyone.

There were other problems too. "I remember that I had to hold on tight to his hand whenever we went to the mall. If he ran away from me, he would go into a fast food joint and help himself to someone else's drink," she reminisced.

The only times when Ping Lian would "lose" his hyperactivity was when he stopped to admire beautiful scenery or when he was browsing through magazines such as the Home & Architectural Trends, she added.

But Sarah did not allow herself to dwell on the negatives for too long. "I needed to face the reality of autism," she told herself. So, the long and difficult journey began for Sarah and Ping Lian. Sarah devoured books by noted autistic author Dr Temple Grandin, motivational writer



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PHOTO FROM WWW.KIDCHANSTUDIO.COM

Napoleon Hill and self-help advocate Anthony Robbins.

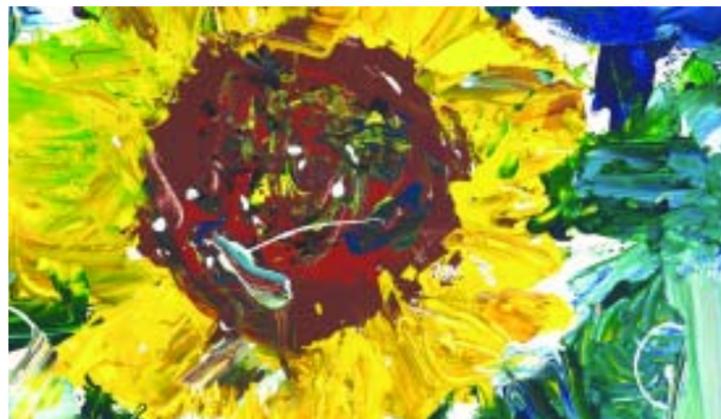
Armed with optimism from her readings, Sarah motivated herself by setting goals and targets for both her and Ping Lian. The quote she used to repeat to herself was: "It does not matter who you are now. It is who you want to be and who you become that matters...make decisions and take action now!"

Sarah also adopted some of the techniques for teaching autistic children such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). ABA-based interventions have been used in various fields but it gained popularity in the past 20 years as a tool for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder. The programme helps to increase or decrease a particular behaviour, to improve the quality of a behaviour, to stop an old behaviour, or teach a new one by breaking down complex tasks into smaller parts and teaching it in a repetitive manner.

Sarah remembers that Ping Lian could hardly hold a pencil correctly to write or use a pair of scissors to cut when he first started. In order to strengthen and develop his fine motor skills, his curriculum included tracing and colouring activities. These activities also served as a way to fill his time since Ping Lian was unable to engage in play activities. Ping Lian also had very poor imitation skills so guiding him in tracing and drawing stroke by stroke was one of the ways to develop his imitation skills. Sarah believes that ultimately these activities became a catalyst for discovering his exceptional artistic talent.

At the age of eight in mid-2002, Ping Lian suddenly acquired an obsession for art. Sarah remembers the sudden transition well. "One day, after he had finished eating an ice-cream cone, he just started drawing the pictures printed on the ice-cream wrapper," she said. Not

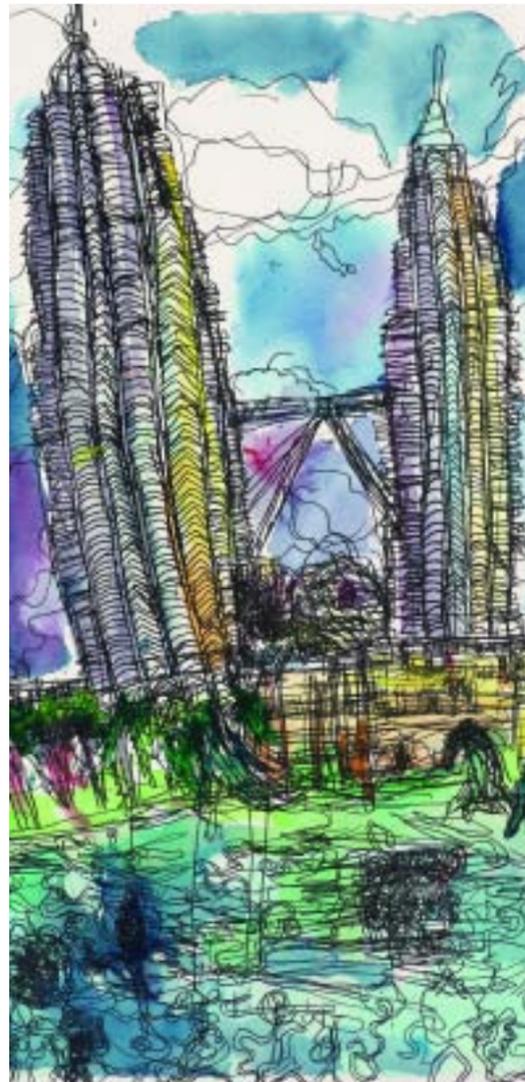
only was the transition quite instantaneous but Ping Lian's progress in sketching and painting also accelerated at an astonishing pace. Sarah sent him to art classes in 2003 and started planning art as a livelihood for him. "The art teachers



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were nervous when I told them my plan but I assured them that I was willing to wait five, 10 or even 20 years," she says. Sarah also remembers writing in her diary in March 2003 that she knew in her heart Ping Lian would be an artist one day. Ping Lian's exceptional art works were quickly recognised and by September 2004, he had already participated in six art exhibitions, two of which were solos. In November 2004, his water colour "Ubudiah Mosque in Perak State" was auctioned off at RM100,000 to an anonymous bidder.

From the initial sketch of pictures on an ice-cream wrapper, Ping Lian now draws and paints architectural structures, animals, nature and even



personal portraits using charcoal, acrylic, watercolour and ink and oil pastels and oil.

Although Sarah's dream of Ping Lian becoming an artist has become a reality, she has not stopped striving to do better. Her research on autism and art on the Internet led her to learn about the savant syndrome and world-renowned researcher on the subject matter, Dr Darold A. Treffert.

When Ping Lian's works had reached a certain level, she decided to

get in touch with Dr Treffert, who is based in Wisconsin.

After going through Ping Lian's works, Dr Treffert recognised him as a savant in September 2004. Describing Ping Lian's art as impressively pleasing and colourful, Dr Treffert said the artwork stands on its own and demonstrates a remarkable ability. "Ping Lian does show extraordinary artistic talent in and of itself. But when seen in contrast to his limitations in other areas of functioning, his artistic talent becomes

even more striking and exceptional," Dr Treffert said in an e-mail interview.

Even though Ping Lian's works were making waves on the local Malaysian art scene then, he was destined for more. Through Dr Treffert, Sarah was introduced to Dr Laurence A. Becker and Dr Rosa C. Martinez. Dr Becker has worked with autistic savant artists for over 30 years and Dr Martinez has been involved in the field of autism as a researcher and educator for 25 years. Together, they introduced Ping Lian's art



to the US in January 2006 through an exhibition in New York City.

Since then, Ping Lian has held art exhibitions all over the US and in Australia (Sydney and Brisbane), and the UK (Cambridge).

Ping Lian is now included in the select group of “prodigious” savants, individuals whose abilities would be considered phenomenal or “genius” if seen in a person without any limitations or special diagnosis of impairment. Dr Treffert said that there are fewer than 100 prodigious savants in the world today. Sarah is especially proud of Ping Lian’s exhibition at the Fond du Lac Windhover Centre for the Arts held in September 2007. Entitled “Windows of Genius: Artwork of the Prodigious Savant”, the exhibition gathered the works of a dozen savant artists aged between 14 and 70.

Today, Ping Lian is recognised worldwide as a gifted artist. His signature style of bold strokes and cheerful colours has won over many art enthusiasts and collectors around the globe.

Ping Lian recently returned to his hometown in Malaysia for an exhibition named “My Journey...Artworks of the Prodigious Savant-Autistic Yeak Ping Lian” at The Art Commune @ Suria Stonor.

Although much of his success as an artist can be attributed to the untiring work of his mother, Sarah was quick to add: “What Ping Lian has achieved thus far would not have been possible without the support, advice and encouragement of many special individuals and organisations. They have contributed to change Ping Lian’s life and also have indirectly set a course for changes in our family life.”

She said that the memory of Ping Lian’s father and his grandmother also serves as strength for the family. Ping Lian’s father passed away in 2004 from a heart attack. “I believe they both

smile upon us from heaven as they witness the progress Ping Lian is making and the positive changes in our lives,” Sarah said.

But most of all, Sarah has great love and admiration for her special son. “Now he is an artist full of love and affection. He is obedient, loving, caring and a grateful boy with a special gift and talent in drawing, painting and colours. Ping Lian’s gift is a gift from God,” Sarah says.

And although Ping Lian still has limited communication and social skills, Dr Treffert believes his savant



ability will bode him well. He said, “The savant abilities such as artistic talent, when exercised and used, can serve as a conduit toward normalisation with increased language, social and daily living skills. I anticipate that is what will happen with Ping Lian over time as ‘training the talent’ helps minimise some of his behavioural and language deficits.” 

For more information about Ping Lian, please visit [www.pinglian.com](http://www.pinglian.com).



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## THE SAVANT SYNDROME

Leslie Lemke was born prematurely in 1952 and developed retinal problems and glaucoma. He subsequently had his eyes removed surgically in the first months of life. He is also mentally handicapped and has cerebral palsy. And although Leslie has never had a music lesson in his life, he can repeat flawlessly on the piano whatever is played to him after a single hearing.

When Stephen Wiltshire was attending a school in London for special children, he was extremely withdrawn and almost mute. He was described as being autistic at five. And yet, Stephen is now recognised as an extraordinary artist as he can reproduce precise and detailed drawings of any architectural structure after a brief viewing. It is almost as if his brain takes a snapshot of what he sees. Both Leslie and Stephen are savants.

The life of a savant made it to the big screen in the portrayal of an autistic savant by Dustin Hoffman in the award-winning movie “Rain Man” back in 1988. And despite all that is written and researched about savants, it is still a mystery as to how savants may not be able to speak much or perform basic everyday tasks – but yet have tremendous memory, can calculate at lightning speed, or produce amazing works of art and music.

World leading researcher on the savant syndrome, Dr Darold A. Treffert describes the savant condition on his website as a rare, but spectacular, condition in which persons with various developmental disorders, including autistic disorder, have astonishing islands of ability, brilliance or talent that stand in stark, markedly incongruous contrast to overall limitations.

A Wisconsin psychiatrist, Dr Treffert has been studying the savant syndrome for nearly 40 years. Based on his findings, he wrote that only one in 10 autistic persons have the savant syndrome, in varying degrees. Meanwhile, only 1% of those with mental retardation or brain injury display the savant skill. As there are more people with mental retardation compared with autism, he estimated that about half of the savants are autistic while the other half have other forms of developmental disability. Not all savants are autistic, and not all autistic persons are savants.

Savant skills exist over a spectrum of abilities. The most common are splinter skills and they include the obsession with, and memorization of, music and sports trivia, licence plate numbers, maps, historical facts, or obscure items such as vacuum cleaner motor sounds, for example. However, there are specially gifted savants whose musical, artistic, mathematical or other special skills are more prominent. They are deemed “prodigious”. According to Dr Treffert, “prodigious” is a high threshold term reserved for savants whose abilities would be spectacular and labelled “genius” if seen in a non-disabled person. In an e-mail interview, he said that there are probably fewer than 100 prodigious savants living worldwide who would meet this high threshold of special skill.

The savant syndrome should not be mistaken as a disorder or disease on its own. It is extraordinary skills grafted onto a more basic brain dysfunction. As such, Dr Treffert said the “treatment” for savant syndrome is the same treatment as that directed towards the more basic central nervous system disorder. So, in the case of a savant-autistic, “treatment” used would be programmes for those in the autistic spectrum.

However, he believes that the special skills possessed by savants can be used in the treatment and rehabilitation so as to overcome or lessen the handicaps from the more basic developmental disorder. The extraordinary abilities can be used as a way of engaging the savant in improved communication capacity, social interaction, and mastery of even daily living skills with movement, and thus toward greater independence overall.