

FATE & DESTINY

We're all in for a long ride in life. So what happens when, along the way, we're faced with something that cannot be altered? Sarah S.H. Lee decided she wasn't going to let it get in the way of her dreams for her son and his future.

TEXT SHANTI GANESAN

In life, you really have two choices. You can wallow in self-pity when the going gets tough or you can opt to pick up the pieces and change your fate with whatever means you have. Sarah S.H. Lee took the second option and is living proof that you can truly steer your destiny towards another direction. But in Sarah's case, it wasn't her own life that needed saving. It was her autistic son's future that she hoped to make brighter.

"I wanted to make sure he wasn't a parasite when I was gone. I wanted to find

an avenue for him to make ends meet so he could stand on his own feet later," she says. Today, Sarah need not worry about her son, Yeak Ping Lian. She discovered that her autistic son is actually a prodigious savant and has the skills to draw. Sarah is now the proud mother of a 14-year-old autistic artist the world is slowly coming to recognise. Needless to say, Sarah has only herself and her equally supportive late husband to thank.

WHEN DID YOU DISCOVER PING LIAN WAS AUTISTIC? In the beginning, we didn't even know what autism was. We just knew that Ping Lian was a bit different because he was extremely hyper-active. So, we took him to the doctors and it was then that he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit

Hyper Active Disorder with autistic features. When he went for a CAT scan and there was nothing abnormal with his brain, I thought nothing was wrong with him and that he was just hyper-active.

I was then enlightened by a speech therapist. He told me not to take it lightly and that my son would not get well with just therapy. That's when it hit me. So, my husband and I went out and got a computer and an internet connection just to find out more about autism. We finally realised what 'autistic' meant and it was truly a shock to us. When we found out what our son's life was going to be like, we were distraught. I couldn't believe it and wondered why God was doing this to us when both my husband and I were good people. That was the initial

PHOTOGRAPHY MARCUS WONG ART DIRECTION SITI AISMAN





stage. Then we slowly got out of it and decided to do something about it.

WHAT DID YOU DO? HOW DID YOU COPE? I read that autistics didn't understand danger, love or affection. They said these children lived in their own world. So, our first aim was not to improve his communication skills or his intelligence. To us, that was secondary. The most important thing for us was to make sure he understood the meaning of love and affection because I just couldn't bear to live with someone who didn't have feelings. That was the part about autism I just couldn't take.

So, my husband and I used all kinds of methods—brain stimulating music, subconscious methods, such as talking to him before he woke up in the morning and so on just to break through to him. I told myself that one day I would achieve this. Ping Lian will have feelings. And by God's grace I managed to see him demonstrate it. Once we took him to the market and there was a little girl crying. My son rushed over to her because he wanted to know what was wrong with her. I remember that moment. I was so glad that my son had affection for someone... for anyone. Maybe he had it earlier and I didn't catch it, I don't know. But that day, I saw it with my own eyes and I was contented. From that one achieved mission, we moved on to the next. He was only 4 years old.

WHEN DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT PING LIAN'S ARTIST SKILLS? I never thought Ping Lian would be an artist. This was because while he had good gross motor skills, he didn't have fine motor skills. I couldn't hold a pencil properly or use scissors in kindergarten. So, we trained him to write. We held his hand and helped him trace a lot. He spent many hours tracing when he was younger. I was still working. But I had a maid to help him with the tracing and cutting. We wanted him to know how to write. That was why we did a lot of this tracing activity.

I wish I could have resigned to help him full time. But I couldn't. I had to work because I still had some financial commitments. Also, having an autistic child was very expensive. On top of my commitments, I hired a lot of teachers to help him.

Soon, he learned how to write. I was supposed to stop him from tracing, but I found that tracing was such a good therapy that I got him to continue it—but this time tracing pictures. So without knowing, at the age of eight, he grew out of tracing and started drawing on his own, non-stop! That's when I discovered his talent as he drew in a very unique way. It struck me immediately that this could be a livelihood for him. At that time, he was only eight, but I kept thinking of what he could do to keep himself afloat.

My first idea was to get him to learn how to serve people so he could work in a *din sum* shop. He wouldn't have to talk for that kind of job. Then when Ping Lian started drawing, it struck me that this could be his future. During one of the holidays, he just drew non-stop. All his cousins were playing, but because he couldn't join them, he drew and drew. It got me thinking—why couldn't my son be an artist? So, I set my dream and aimed that Ping Lian would one day become an artist, but not overnight. I thought since he had interest in art, I was going to train him and develop his skills.

I got three teachers to teach him and told them my dream. I said, 'I want you to teach though Ping Lian would be an artist. This was the future'. The teachers looked anxious and worried. But I told them, 'Don't worry, I'm not in a hurry. I have patience. If in five years he can't achieve it, I'll wait 10 years. If in 10 years he still isn't there yet, I'll wait 15 years.'

I had a thought in my mind. By 15 years, Ping Lian would be 23 years old and that would be a perfect time to earn his livelihood. If in 15 years, the teachers still couldn't make an artist out of him, it didn't matter, I'd give



up my dream. But at least Ping Lian would have found a hobby. I'd let him continue his drawing as a hobby. We had nothing to lose. But it all worked out well for us in the end. He took a much shorter time to demonstrate his skills than we expected.

HOW DID YOU TAKE THINGS FROM THERE? From there, I knew the only way to materialise our dreams for Ping Lian was to brainwash him. So, everyday, I would tell him that he was an artist and associated being an artist to something that was strong and great. That was how it all started. I didn't know he would be so good, but of course every thing Ping Lian drew was nice to me. It was encouragement for him.

The teachers were very good too and because Ping Lian already showed talent, I told them not to tell him what to do. I wanted to maintain his style. I just wanted them to guide him. They were normal art teachers but I gave them a summary of autistic children articles and asked them to read it so they would know how to work around him. He had three teachers because autistic children are very rigid. If I gave him one teacher, he'd learn that teacher's style only. If I gave him three teachers, as I did, he'd learn different ways and eventually find his own

style. I thought that would be the most ideal way to do it and it worked. I also got him to learn from the three teachers in different environments to spice it up for him.

HOW DID YOU KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT AUTISM? When I found out my son was autistic, my reading [veered towards learning about] autistic people. I also went for seminars to further my knowledge. There

then, just like that, he had a sudden heart attack and passed away in 2004.

When he passed away, I was devastated. It crushed me and to pick myself up once more was just excruciating. I'm a dreamer but when my husband died I didn't want to dream anymore. I didn't want to work hard anymore. But sometimes, when you go off track, there will always be someone to pull you back on track again. And that's precisely how I came back to my senses. I had the support of so many people and my faith in God.

Soon, I got in touch with many people who were willing to help me with Ping Lian and his skills. The first person was Dr. Darold Treffert, a global expert on Savant Syndrome. He was also the consultant to the movie *Rainman*. I got in touch with him through his website and he became very interested in Ping Lian's condition. He then guided and advised me as well as networked me to different people. He introduced me to Dr. Martinez Rosa, an authority in early intervention curriculum for children on the

I used it as motivation for my work—I was a sales and marketing person. Another book was Dr. Temple Grandin's *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*. Grandin was labeled the most intelligent autistic person in the world and she has written a lot of books and goes for many conferences. That book too gave me an insight on autism. Ping Lian has had an exhibition with Grandin as well. Seeing her made me believe that there's much hope for my son.

HOW DID YOU COPE WITH YOUR HUSBAND'S DEATH?

Just before my husband passed away, we already knew Ping Lian was gifted in art. We roughly knew his potential. I talked to my husband—I thought maybe I didn't have to work full time so I could concentrate on Ping Lian. My husband was doing well at the time, so we could afford doing some charity work as well. But

autism spectrum. I could relate a lot to her because she's a woman and together we have decided to write a book about Ping Lian's journey. The idea came about when I emailed her some of my writings from my diary. She was thrilled and that's when she decided that writing a book would be a good idea. I never expected it. But I always believed that if you give your best, things will fall through, just as it is now for both Ping Lian and myself.

HOW DID ART CHANGE PING LIAN? When Ping Lian started drawing, he changed a lot. There was a lot of improvement in him in other aspects. For me, personally, I believe in killing not two, but many birds with one stone, simply because we had limited resources. When I got three teachers for Ping Lian, it wasn't just so he didn't attain one style, I also wanted him to interact with different people. The more people he dealt with, the better he got. The interaction helped him see and learn things from the normal world.

I always thought that was important... that he came into the real world and not stay trapped in his own. I used to take him to the National Art Gallery's art market every month once. I let him draw in front of the public so he'd get used to the distraction so it wouldn't be a distraction for him in time. I also thought him how to appreciate people and understand what's socially right and his autistic school. Art was not only an outlet for Ping Lian to express himself, it was also to teach him a lot of other things. It has certainly enriched his character.

WHAT ARE YOU AND PING LIAN DOING NOW? We're in Sydney now with my two daughters. I'm busy with Ping Lian, some part-time work and I'm also writing a book. I also arrange art exhibitions for Ping Lian and on weekends, I take him to the art market in Sydney to teach him about life. There, he can also learn how to set up a store and basically how to be independent. Also, he goes to an autistic school, so everyone is autistic. By going to the markets, he can see what the real world is like. So, when he's done drawing he watches people walk by and just observe life... the normal environment and what that's like.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE MOTHERS WHO HAVE AUTISTIC CHILDREN? I always believe that you should never give up hope. We just need to do our best, no need to be the best. We must always be contented with whatever we have but not be complacent. *

* Girard Perregaux together with The Art Commune presented 'My Journey by Yeak Ping Lian' recently at The Art Commune @ Suria Stonor.

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were also two books that gave me some hope. The book *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill truly inspired me. The author's son couldn't hear as he had no physical ears. Hill used a subconscious technique to get through to his son and in the end he saved his son from deaf mutism. I learned from that book and the ironic part about it is that I read this book before I knew my son was autistic.