



**M**any of us often take life too much for granted, especially when the going is good. Everything may go your way but what happens when life suddenly smashes you with a curveball and turns your world upside down? How will you react when your picturesque world crumbles around you without warning? For Sarah S.H. Lee, she was hit with two curveballs – the first was when she discovered that her only son, Yeak Ping Lian had autism, and the second was when her husband passed away. It would have been easy for her to blame God and wallow in anger and self-pity, but not Sarah, who demonstrated the true strength of a mother's love and devotion to her son, and that nothing can stand in her way of fulfilling her dreams to give Ping Lian a bright hope and future. **PASSIONS** is honoured to share her story and Ping Lian's in the following pages.

THE **WORLD** IS HIS **CANVAS**

AUTISM IS NO BARRIER  
TO PING LIAN'S  
JOURNEY TO BECOME A  
GREAT ARTIST

## Life-changing discovery

When one meets 15-year-old Ping Lian for the first time and without having prior knowledge of his background and "special abilities", one would suspect nothing of a tall, dark and handsome young man. Sweet, friendly and perhaps occasionally lost in his own world. After all, are not most teenagers today absorbed in their own world, too? Most people would most certainly conclude that Ping Lian is just another normal adolescent boy.

But Ping Lian is far from normal. He is a special boy with extraordinary talent, which his mother believes is a "gift from God." People who are blessed with extraordinary talents such as Ping Lian's are called "savants" because they have a rare, but spectacular, condition called Savant Syndrome. Dr. Darold Treffert, a well-known researcher on the Savant Syndrome, defines savants as individuals who display exceptional feats and capabilities in mathematics, memory, music or art despite challenging developmental disorders such as autism or mental retardation. In his website, [www.savantsyndrome.com](http://www.savantsyndrome.com), there are 25 people currently listed as known savants.

And what Ping Lian has was certainly a challenge to him and his family. However, as Sarah tells PASSIONS, she had initially thought that Ping Lian was nothing more than a rambunctious and active boy, telling herself that "It's only a phase. He'll settle down eventually." She and her husband only began to suspect that something was awry when Ping Lian began displaying noticeably different behaviour and speech, something which was serious enough to warrant a visit to the doctor's.

Among the unusual behaviour exhibited by Ping Lian that caused them to worry was his limitation in speech, and lack of attentiveness. Sarah said it was difficult to get him to sit still and pay attention to a single task and she also mentioned that while other children in the nursery was able to settle down after a certain time. Also Ping Lian would be the only one whom the teachers could not get to settle and he would refuse to let others touch him.



Fearing the worst, Sarah and her husband were initially relieved when the brain test done on Ping Lian revealed that his brain was normal and the doctor only diagnosed him as having Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) with autistic features. Back in the 1990s, not much was known about the term "autistic", and because no further information was provided, Sarah overlooked it. They were just overjoyed to know that Ping Lian did not have "serious problems", erroneously concluding that with therapy, he would become better.

Sarah admits that after the diagnosis, she did not put in any further effort to help her son, believing that the therapies he underwent were sufficient and was just waiting for Ping Lian to grow out of his condition. She recalled that she received "a heavy hammering" from the therapist, who told her that she had not done enough for Ping Lian and that something needed to be done about it before it was too late for him. It was only then that she and her husband realised it was serious and that they needed to know more about what Ping Lian was suffering from.

**Above:** Ping Lian hard at work creating one of his many colourful masterpieces. He is adept in various styles of art, including water colours, oil on canvas and ink.

Sarah shared that when they finally understood what "autistic" and "autism" really is, it was her most shocking realisation ever. "It was obvious to us then that Ping Lian was autistic. He did not merely have ADHD with autistic features. When we realised what this meant, we were extremely distraught," she recalled.

## Coping with autism

Sarah shares that her perspective on life has completely changed. She has endured a painful struggle, but the most important thing for her was that the family became closer and that everyone did the best that they could to help Ping Lian. She also expressed her gratitude towards various support groups such as PR4A (Parents' Resource for Autism) which extended their moral support and encouragement, helping the family to better understand Ping Lian's condition.

She also then recalled how she and her husband paid more emphasis on building up Ping Lian's emotional quotient because they couldn't accept the idea of Ping Lian being unable to express emotions, let alone feel love and affection. "We told ourselves that no matter what, Ping Lian would have feelings and understand emotions. He would be able to express love as well as show care and concern. And by God's grace," she adds, "Ping Lian has succeeded" - recalling on occasion when Ping Lian surprised her by making a hot cup of Milo for her even though she only asked him to turn the kettle on.

Nevertheless, like all mothers, Sarah also worried over how Ping Lian would make a living when he grew up. Thus, she began planning her son's future. She wanted to ensure that Ping Lian would become independent and be able to earn a living. She contemplated professions that Ping Lian would be able to learn such as being a cleaner, gardener or working at cafés. She recalls that Ping Lian used to exhibit poor fine motor skills, could not communicate properly and would not let strangers approach him. She tells PASSIONS that it was through intensive programs and therapies from an early age that have



**Left:** This piece entitled 04131 - Christ Church Melaka II is considered one of Ping Lian's important works, which he drew in 2004.

**Below:** Also created in 2004, the 04105 - Ubudiah Mosque I, is perhaps Ping Lian's most valuable work of art thus far. It was sold for RM100,000 at an auction to raise funds for the Riding for the Disabled Association of Malaysia.

enabled them to effectively address the weaknesses that Ping Lian had to overcome.

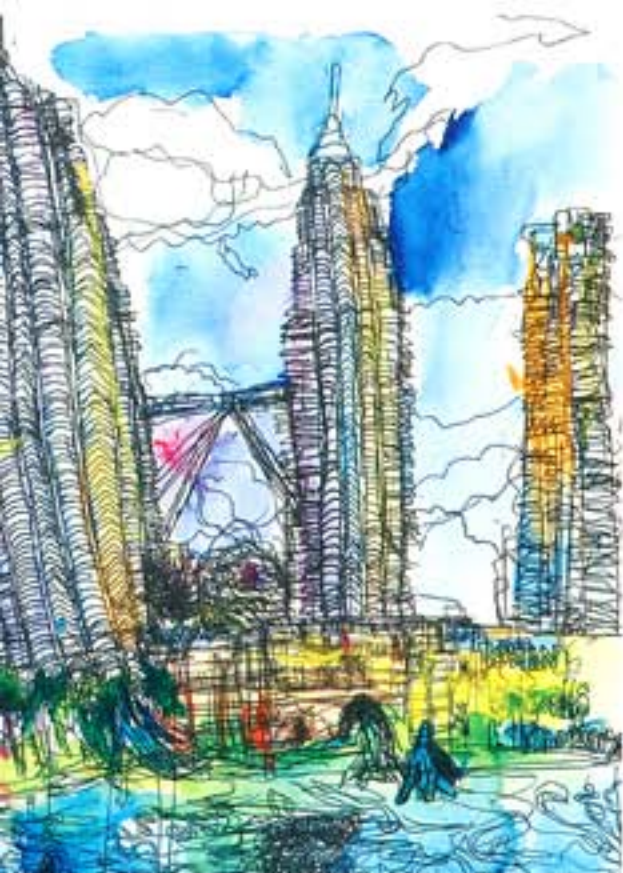
It was through these activities that Ping Lian's latent skills in drawing and art came to the fore. To strengthen and develop his fine motor skills, the activities in his home schooling curriculum included tracing and colouring. These activities were originally intended to fill his time as Ping Lian was unable to participate in vigorous physical activities. "Seeing he had poor imitation skills, I used to sit with him and hold his hand as he was tracing," Sarah recalled, adding that as she was still working full time then, it was her maid and home tutors that helped Ping Lian most often.

According to Sarah, helping him to trace and draw stroke by stroke was one of the methods used to improve Ping Lian's imitation skills because when he did it freely, he would scribble without direction, creating a mess of random doodles. It certainly took a considerable amount of patience and dedication to sit with him and do hours of tracing and colouring each day. But all this effort was definitely not an exercise in futility, as ultimately, these activities were the catalyst that led to the discovery of Ping Lian's extraordinary artistic abilities.



"We wanted him to start writing. That was the reason we focused more on the tracing activities. It was a good form of therapy for him, therefore rather than stopping him from tracing after he started writing. I got him to trace pictures instead. I was certainly astonished when one day, Ping Lian picked up a pencil and started drawing freely by himself, at the age of eight!" Sarah shared.

## Beginning of a dream



From that moment on, Ping Lian's talents blossomed as he began drawing in such an extremely complex manner. Sarah realised that drawing could become Ping Lian's livelihood, and she was determined to help Ping Lian become an artist. However, as one who believes in taking things one step at a time, Sarah tells us that she understood it was not an overnight process. "I told the three art tutors I hired about my dream for Ping Lian, and they were initially anxious. I told them that even if it did not happen in five years, it was okay. I was prepared to wait another 10, if not 15," she shared.

In 2003, when Ping Lian was nine-years-old, Sarah wrote in her diary "I want to develop Ping Lian as an artist, I know that he will be an artist one day" and as a firm believer in brain stimulation and subconscious strategies, she got her son to say "I want to be an artist" every day to help boost his self-confidence and inspire him. Gradually, as Ping Lian grew older, she began teaching him to say "I want to be a good artist" in order to further prompt her son. She shares that she has reached the stage where she is teaching him to say "I want to be a great artist" which Sarah knows in her heart that Ping Lian is already on his way to become one.

Anti-clockwise, from top left:

Various interpretations of Kuala Lumpur City, one of his favourite subjects, that showcases the brilliance of his artistic mind - 05107 - KL Twin Towers VI, 06104 - KL Twin Towers IV and 08105 - Kuala Lumpur City. The latter was put up for auction in conjunction with the opening of Ping Lian's permanent exhibition at The Art Commune on the 13th of August.

However, even she admits that she was astounded by the progress he has made over the years, surpassing expectations in a time shorter than Sarah could have imagined. By the age of 11, Ping Lian had drawn many beautiful pieces which showcased his uncanny ability to portray his subjects in a vibrant, lively manner, with each painting imbued with an innocent quality that could only be achieved by one whose world view is unblemished by cynicism. One of his most famous works created at this age is that of Perak's Ubudiah Mosque, which fetched an astonishing RM100,000 when it was put up on auction to raise funds for the Riding for the Disabled Association of Malaysia.

"I have received so much help from people over the years, especially since my husband's sudden passing in 2004, and have been blessed with so many 'God-sent angels' that I believe that it is only right Ping Lian's miraculous talent has helped contribute back to society," Sarah told us.



## The gift from God

It becomes immediately apparent to anybody, through his intricate masterpieces, that Ping Lian's gift is truly extraordinary. Even a perfectly normal child who has undergone the most rigid and intensive training in art cannot be compared to the exceptional level of skill that Ping Lian displays.

Sarah continued her research on the Internet in 2004 to find out if there were others like Ping Lian. She discovered that there were, in fact, many who possessed exceptional abilities and skills however none accurately matched Ping Lian's. It was only by chance during her searches for answers that Sarah came across Dr. Treffert's website and his research on Savant Syndrome.

Dr. Treffert also happened to be the consultant for the movie *Rain Man* which starred Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. The movie was based on the life of the "Real Rain Man" Kim Peek, whose condition falls in the same savant category as Ping Lian, with the exception of Kim suffering from congenital brain abnormalities. He possessed total recall abilities, or a photographic memory - Kim could memorise precise dates and times of birth, and could achieve many other uncanny feats of memory such as accurately recalling the headlines of newspapers dating back decades and the ability to play the piano by hearing alone.

When Sarah made the discovery, she was ecstatic and immediately sent an e-mail to Dr. Treffert sharing Ping Lian's condition while attaching some of Ping Lian's artworks, hoping to get his expert opinion. She admits that she never expected feedback from Dr. Treffert; so one can imagine her surprise and delight when many months later, Dr. Treffert replied her e-mail saying "Ping Lian's art is really very amazing. I would certainly put him into the category of 'savants'." And according to Dr. Treffert, Ping Lian falls in the category of "prodigious savants", the highest level of savants.

By networking with Dr. Treffert and other specialists based in the U.S., Sarah began



learning more about Ping Lian's unique condition and eventually came to acknowledge "Truly, Ping Lian's creativity, artistic ability and insight are gifts from God." Through contacts such as Dr. Treffert who later introduced her to another expert, Dr. Laurence Becker who later introduced her to another expert, Dr. Rosa C. Martinez, numerous doors of opportunity were opened to Ping Lian, so much so even a 2004 documentary called *Savant Syndrome* by KBS featured him alongside Kim Peek. Another U.K.-made documentary called *Painting the Mind* by Focus Productions also featured Ping Lian and was broadcast in Europe and Australia.

Ping Lian has also been invited to showcase his artworks at exhibitions in New York such as the prestigious Henry Gregg Gallery in 2007, where he made his international debut at the tender age of 12 at an exhibition organised by Dr. Becker and Dr. Martinez called "Autistic Savant Artworks: Don't 'dis' the Ability"; at another exhibition which was held at the United Nations Headquarters in 2008 as part of the inaugural World Autism Awareness Day celebration, and most recently, at Avalon Hollywood for the inaugural "Heroes for Autism" exhibition held in April this year, where Ping Lian got his first taste of Hollywood glamour as his artworks are featured alongside the works of other famous autistic artists and Hollywood superstars. His artworks were exhibited in the U.K. and Germany and since he was based in Australia in 2006, Ping Lian has also showcased his works in Sydney and Brisbane. In September, his artworks will be exhibited for the first time in Japan.

Above left: 09002 - Sydney City, Ping Lian's latest piece, reveals another unique feature about many of his complex artworks - a three dimensional effect resulting from a clever combination of colours and stark lines.

Above right: Created in conjunction with the Year of the Rooster in 2005, 05402 - Prosperous New Year, is a beautiful masterpiece featuring Ping Lian's favourite rooster belonging to his neighbour.

As Sarah tells PASSIONS, "Ever since Ping Lian began to draw, we have seen him change and improve by leaps and bounds. Art helped him to break out from his own world into the real world. It has become an outlet, an instrument for him to express himself and relate to others around him. Art has enriched his life so much!"

Today, Ping Lian is an exuberant 15-year-old boy who continues to amaze those who view his spectacular artworks, especially his sprawling ink works of the skylines of Kuala Lumpur and Sydney that boggle the minds with their complexity and accuracy.

Come the 15th of August, Ping Lian's artworks will be put on permanent showcase at The Art Commune in Subang Jaya, made possible by Yvonne Hon, owner of The Art Commune and supported by JPMorgan Chase Foundation in collaboration with the Association of British Women in Malaysia (ABWM). The showcase, called "Ping Lian @ The Art Commune", will provide the public with an avenue to admire his wonderful works, and to show their support for Ping Lian who is, as Dr Treffert acknowledged, "a national treasure". And in conjunction with the opening of the launch of this gallery, Sarah reveals that she will put up a piece of Ping Lian's artwork for auction, with all proceeds going to charity.

**Right:** Ping Lian, the immensely gifted 15-year-old artist, is ecstatic about coming back to Malaysia to launch the permanent showcase of his works at The Art Commune. Pictured here is his loving and dedicated mother, Sarah Lee.

**Below:** A glimpse of the "Ping Lian @ The Art Commune" showcase, where many of Ping Lian's early works and his best pieces are put on display for public viewing.

*The touching story of Sarah and her son, Ping Lian is remarkable and inspiring. It demonstrates that no adversity is too impossible to overcome. For Sarah and her family as well as those who continue to support Ping Lian, they see beyond his condition and believe in the vast potential that he has within. And through their continued love and support, Ping Lian has blossomed to truly see that the world is, indeed, his canvass. To sum it up, Sarah reminds us that we should "celebrate and focus on what autistic and people with special needs and abilities can do, not what they can't do and NOT to label them as 'DISABLED'."*



Ping Lian @ The Art Commune showcasing the artworks of the prodigious savant is officially open to the public from the 15th of August. For enquiries, please contact The Art Commune at Tel: 03-5635 9110 / 019-3368 928