

05 JUL, 2023

University of life

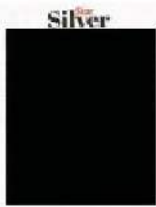
The Star, Malaysia



Tower of strength

To see her son through college, 64-year-old Angie Yong Lai Chan decided she would need to get a degree herself! 2&3

Photo: ANGIE YONG LAI, CHAN



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By ANN MARIE CHANDY

A GOOD education is important because it equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in life and contribute to society. Angie Yong Lai Chan steadfastly holds on to this tenet, and has striven her whole life to equip her family with the best possible education they could have.

Today, her eldest daughter is a graphic designer, daughter No.2 is a medical doctor and daughter No.3 holds a PhD in Information Technology.

Yong's youngest child, 32-year-old Ng Yi Shen was diagnosed with global developmental delay as a child, meaning he experiences delays in multiple areas of development, and has had to deal with numerous physical and mental challenges over the years. Nonetheless, with his parents' constant love and care – and in particular, mum's guidance and fortitude – Yi Shen has been able to finish primary and secondary school, pass his IGCSE exams and recently obtain a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies with Honours. What's even more incredible is that his mum graduated right beside him!

"It hasn't been an easy journey but it feels great to have a degree after all these years!" says the loquacious, affable, ever-bubbly 64-year-old who donned her graduation cap and gown last year, after earning herself a string of As and Bs and a strong CGPA, cementing her lifelong pursuit of knowledge. Graduating alongside Yi Shen was, more importantly, testament to her true dedication as a parent, which she downplays saying "I have always just done my duty."

Constant companion

It is hard to separate the lives of this mother and son because they have been intertwined for so long. To understand what Yong has achieved these last three decades, we have to rewind to when Yi Shen was a toddler who couldn't walk or talk.

"We were aware that something was not right when Yi Shen didn't start crawling or talking at the usual milestone years," Yong shares. "I had no choice but to give up my job at the time – I was an assistant to an engineer in an IT company – to care for my son. My husband and I were constantly taking him for consultations to a series of health professionals – physiotherapists, psychiatrists, doctor after doctor."

Yong says that when it came time for kindergarten, they had to hop from school to school, in Penang where they lived, to find a place where Yi Shen would fit in.

"But they all turned us away after a while. The teachers were not able to cope or understand Yi Shen. One teacher even accused me of torturing my son because of his shy, detached demeanour! That shocked and hurt me because this was my son, whom I loved so much."

When it came to primary school, Yong was advised that Yi Shen would have to go into the Special Education Programme.

"But I refused. I knew Yi Shen's strengths and weaknesses and that he would fare better in the regular class-

room. He was just slower than the rest and needed someone to help him. So I would go to school with him every day. I would stand or squat outside his classroom, listen and take down notes, and then every night I would coach him until midnight," she says.

Mind you, she did this tirelessly for six years, all while also taking care of the rest of her family, cooking and cleaning and doing the marketing, too!

"I had a lot of support from Yi Shen's teachers, they were all very kind and patient. I remember one of his teachers, a Chinese man, who would sit Yi Shen on his lap when things got too tough for him. It touched me deeply that he had very strong, paternal feelings towards my child!"

During secondary school, Yong was no longer allowed to accompany her son to school anymore, but she would continue to coach him daily, and he got through his PMR exams.

"However, in Form 4, at the Heng Ee High School, Yi Shen began to struggle with subjects like Living Skills and History. I knew he would not be able to cope with the government syllabus. He was also at an age when he could rebel. He clearly didn't want to study those subjects."

Yong decided to take him out of government school and try homeschooling and other private schools instead, finally ending up at an institution in KL where Yi Shen was able to sit for his IGCSE exams. Being in KL meant Yong was able to care for her other children as well, as her daughters had already moved from Penang to the capital city to pursue their tertiary education.

Yi Shen managed to get three credits in his IGCSE/O Levels at the age of 25, but that was not the end of his education journey because Yong then started looking for a college where her son could continue his studies.

"We went to college after college," she rattles off the names. "But Yi Shen either couldn't get in or stay for long. He had always shown an affinity for art from his primary school days when he would draw in all his books, but we never had the time or resources to send him for art classes then. It was difficult enough to get through school work," Yong says. "Now, perhaps the time was right to start looking into art as an option for the future ... but nothing was working out and Yi Shen was losing interest."

After staying at home for a year, not getting anywhere, Yong decided to take a different tack. "I told Yi Shen that I was going to do my degree and asked him if he would tag along. 'You accompany mummy to college' I said, and he agreed!" she says, adding that they both sat for the TOEFL exam, and got admission into Wawasan Open University. "I felt sure that if I was with him I would be able to support him through uni, as I had done throughout his schooling life."

Not so easy

What came next took Yong by surprise. "Everything was so difficult! After so many years away from school, and with so much new technology ... we couldn't get the hang of things – even doing simple google searches was a challenge, what more figuring out what plagiarism was or how to 'Turnitin' (submitting assignments through a plagiarism checker)!"

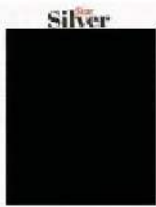
Things were really tough



Making sure all her children get a solid education has always been important for Yong.

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Yi Shen calls himself an imaginary artist and has participated in many exhibitions online and offline in the United States, Italy, China, Hong Kong, India, the Philippines and all over Malaysia.

and Yong said that she was ready to throw in the towel many times, but she forced herself to keep going for Yi Shen's sake! Thankfully, one of Yong's nephews was also attending the same college and he was able to assist with some of the basic onboarding.

"Classes were on the weekends and we had the usual assignments, tests and exams but it took us almost five years to complete our degree.

"Yi Shen is good at doing research but when it came to writing essays, he could get very long-winded, so it would take us a long time to finish our assignments. Once I had completed my work, I would have to help him with his. Our English is not that great either so often we would have to translate everything into Chinese to understand it properly, then translate our answers back to English again!

"On the bright side, our classmates were all great and showed me a lot of respect because I was an older student. I never told anyone that Yi Shen was my son because I didn't want that to get in the way. But we never kept it a secret either. Many people found out from social media."

Needless to say, Yong was thrilled when, in 2022, both she and her son passed their final exams.

"My heart was bursting with happiness. What an incredible achievement for both of us," she says beaming. "As I reflect on our journey, you cannot imagine what I feel, because it represents a countless number of sacrifices. Being a part of Yi Shen's growth and witnessing his success fills me with a sense of fulfillment that words cannot adequately describe."

During this time they also fortuitously met local artist Alice Chang who took Yi Shen under her wing and has been steadily providing him with guidance and opportunities to gain confidence in his artistic abilities.

Today, Yi Shen calls himself an imaginary artist and has participated in many exhibitions online and offline in the United States, Italy, China, Hong Kong, India,



the Philippines and all over Malaysia, which have helped him develop confidence and composure. Yi Shen also proudly has his own shoplot, Yi Shen Creative Studio, at the GMBB Mall in Kuala Lumpur where he exhibits and sells his work, mum still cheering on from the sidelines.

"I truly believe that Yi Shen's degree in Liberal Arts paved the way for him to be able to socialise and communicate better with people. Look at him today, he is confident and talks so much compared to the shy boy who would sit in the corner and draw in his exercise books!"

As for herself, Yong believes that where there is a will, there is a way. She says she has learnt that in life, challenges will come and not everyone may be supportive of what you do, but for as many detractors as you have, there will be those who encourage and lend a hand. "You just have to look for the right opportunities, find the best fit and fight for your rights when you need to! When it comes to children, store up on love and patience. And keep improving yourself every day."

Never too late to pursue a dream

Growing up in a large family in Air Itam, Penang in the 1960s and 70s, Yong was the sixth of 10 children.

"We were from a poor family ... My father was a bladesmith, someone who sharpened scissors and tools for people, my mother was a housewife. Most of my sisters only made it up to Standard Five, and after that they had to work. But I happened to be good at school and went all the way up to Form 5. I even got into the Science Stream," she says proudly, then tears up soon after.

"My father could not afford to send me any further than secondary school. I remember him crying when he had to tell me that I would not be able to continue my studies. Whatever money we had would go to ensuring my brothers had an ample education. It broke his heart but I understood."

Yong finished high school in 1977 and four years later she was married to shipyard technician Brian Ng. Today, their family - Ng (now a plant manager), Yong and all four of their children - are graduates, thanks to Yong's strong belief that education changes lives and her tenacity in ensuring everyone was able to pursue their studies as far as they could go.

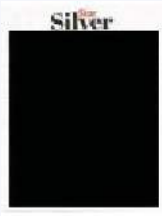
When Yong graduated last year, one of her tutors whom she had shared her life story with affirmed what she already knew in her heart. With tears now streaming down her face, Yong says: "My tutor told me 'your father will be smiling down at you. How proud he must be of all his daughter has accomplished!'"



Mother and son at their graduation.



Yong gave up her job as an assistant to an engineer in an IT company to care for her son.



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SUMMARIES

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