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'He left behind an ocean of joy': After a 15-year cancer battle, this 22-year-old's final wish was to raise money for charity

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ENJOY LIFE
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Left: Joel seeing his artwork printed on a tote bag for the first time; Right: Children's Cancer Foundation social worker San San with Marianne (in stripes)
Courtesy of Marianne Lam, AsiaOne/ Kimberly Anne Lim

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"Enjoy life" is one of those expressions people love to throw around – often used in the same breath as "Live life to the fullest" and "You only live once."

But those two simple words – featured front and centre on Joel Lim's artwork – now seem to carry a different weight.

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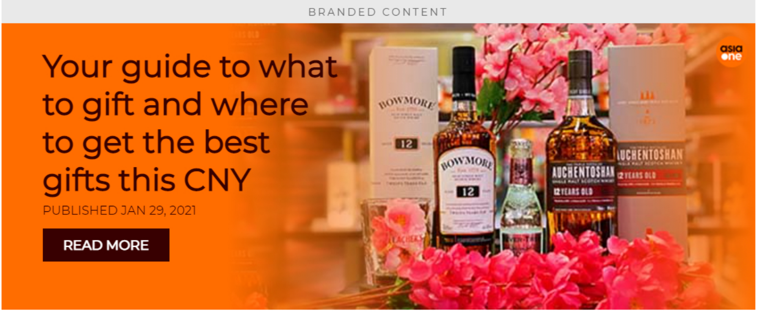
Joel, 22, passed away in September 2020 after a 15-year battle with cancer. Now, Marianne Lam is trying to fulfil her son's final wish – to raise funds for charity with his art.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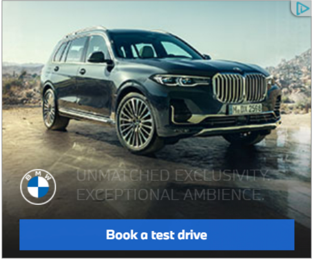
It's in early February when we meet Marianne at her home. Her grief is still palpable, even as she greets us cheerfully.

Joel's artwork, blown-up and printed out, is housed in a carrying case in the family's living room. Mounting boards adorned with snapshots from his childhood are accorded a prominent spot, right in front of their sofa.

From a suave #OOTD taken on the streets of Barcelona, to a photo of him grinning brightly in front of Chicago's famous bean sculpture, you'd never guess that he was enduring fortnightly chemotherapy sessions, and more, for most of his life.



It started with a lump on his hand

Her first inkling that something was wrong was when Joel developed a lump on his hand at the age of seven, Marianne told AsiaOne.

When the lump persisted despite a course of antibiotics, she and her husband Jeremy brought Joel to the hospital, where he underwent an operation to remove it.

The experience left Joel traumatised, she said, recalling how he had tried to bolt from the operation theatre and even required sedation.

But Joel's ordeal had only just begun. After weeks of tests, the Lims received the diagnosis: acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, a type of cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

Never missed his exams despite illness

Joel spent most of his schooling years dealing with relapses and undergoing chemotherapy, as well as several rounds of chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-Cell treatment. But he insisted on attending school whenever possible, Marianne recalled.

This was despite the curveballs life threw at him – from a bone marrow transplant scheduled right before he was originally supposed to sit for his PSLE, to a chicken pox outbreak the day before his O-levels.

But Joel was unfazed.

Marianne recounted, "My boy with his 'never say die' attitude was like, 'I'm going to do it!'"

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True to his word, he never missed a paper, even while he was hooked up to an intravenous drip, itching and in pain.

Joel's O-level results exceeded her expectations, Marianne said, and he was looking forward to attending Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Design.

But he only got to attend for one day – his cancer had returned by this point and was "more and more aggressive".

In January last year, the family was resigned to the fact that Joel's treatments were not going to work. The side effects were so severe that Joel needed medication that would compromise the treatment, Marianne explained.

"It's very difficult when you come to that point. Which route do you want to take?" she mused. "Of course, you would choose one where he doesn't need to suffer so much."

Joel himself had accepted the outcome, assuring his doctors to "just make me comfortable", she added.

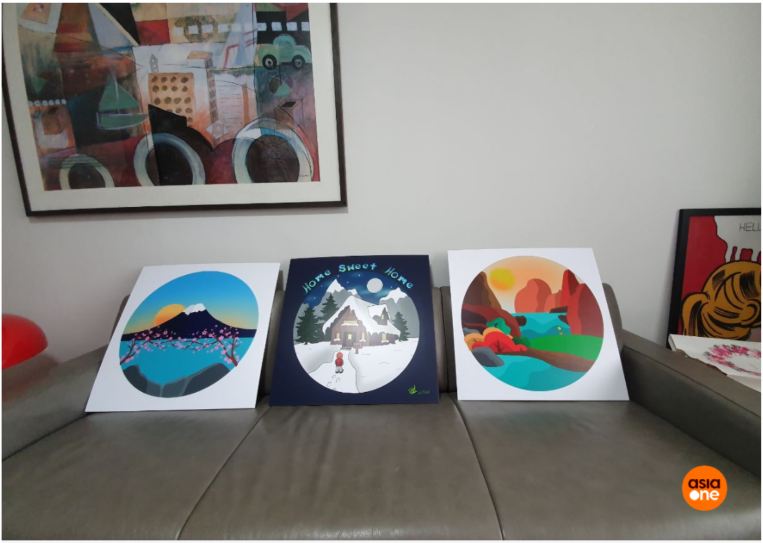
Wanted to give back

Even in his last months, with his mobility affected by his treatments, Joel remained hard at work, with a single-minded focus on doing good.

He started drawing after his older brother Gabriel introduced him to a digital illustration app, creating technicolour renderings of some of his favourite memories.

When one drawing, spontaneously gifted to one of his doctors, saw an overwhelmingly positive response (and much envy on the part of the other doctors and nurses), Joel got to work immediately, producing more to give away as tokens of his appreciation.

"He needed my help to even move his legs. But even even those times, he was just fiercely drawing."



Three of Joel's drawings, featuring scenes from his overseas travels.
PHOTO: AsiaOne/ Kimberly Anne Lim

He also became determined to raise funds for charity, said Marianne, after she surprised him by printing one of his works on a tote bag.

She'd chosen a sunset scene from Seattle, where he had spent some time participating in a clinical trial.

Joel chose to add "Enjoy life" to that drawing, she explained it was a reminder from him to find the beauty in the small things.

"He had told her, 'I was really enjoying the sunset, I was really enjoying the sandwich before that. I was really enjoying everything that comes my way, you know?'"

She beamed as she recalled Joel's excitement when he first saw the tote bag – he had apparently exclaimed, "I can make money!"

Joel's last party

His first thought was to raise money in benefit of the Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF), Marianne said, adding that the foundation had been assisting them since Joel's diagnosis on all matter of issues, or in her own words, "from A to Z".

It's not hard to believe – San San, the social worker who's been supporting the family for over a year was a reassuring presence at our interview, ever ready with fresh tissues whenever Marianne got emotional.

CCF also planned Joel's last party, Marianne told us, naming it one of the highlights of his final months.

As part of the foundation's Wishlink programme for children at the end of their life or with poor prognosis, Joel requested for a 'Celebration of Life' party to thank his doctors, nurses and all those who had helped him along the way.

The celebration, complete with his favourite bagels, pizza and cake, moved him to tears, Marianne said.

'Who else but you?'

Unfortunately, Joel passed away in September last year before the fundraising project came to fruition. Still grieving from the loss, Marianne revealed it was a difficult decision for her to pick up the baton.

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But a conversation with a close friend convinced her that she had to make the fundraiser happen to honour Joel's last wishes.

"She told me, 'This is his wish right? Who else but you to carry it out?'"

With a renewed determination, the Lim family approached CCF to put the campaign together, offering tote bags with Joel's sunset drawing for donations above $30.

Over $23,000 has been raised as of Monday (Feb 8), a spokesperson for CCF confirmed.

The campaign, which coincides with International Childhood Cancer Day on Feb 15, will run till Feb 28.

Expressing her gratitude for the support thus far, Marianne said, "You're making Joel very happy and keeping his take on life alive.

"He left behind an ocean of joy. Of course I miss him a lot. But he made sure to assure us that he was ready to go.

"That was the way he was."

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