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Her son's battle with leukaemia inspires her to use his final artwork to help others

Joel Lim spends 15 years battling cancer, ends up inspiring family, friends and even his doctors with his grit and empathy.

Chee Wen Qi
Feb 16, 2021

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Despite spending most of his life undergoing chemotherapy, radiotherapy and taking daily drug cocktails, his spirit never wavered.

This is the story of Joel Lim, a brave fighter who battled against childhood cancer for 15 years.

Joel passed away last September at the age of 22, but even in his brief life, he made his mark on family, friends and everyone who knew him.

His mother Marianne tells The Pride: "He never dwelled on the bad, he always told me 'Mum, with all the bad, some good will come'."

"No matter how small the good, he always celebrated it."

That's why Marianne wants to remember her son by helping him fulfil his last wish – to help raise funds for the Children's Cancer Foundation through his art.

She wrote on the CCF fundraising page: "A couple of months before his passing, Joel drew from his memory of our last sunset and we managed to have the drawing printed out as a tote bag.

"He was so overjoyed, his smile was priceless and we were happy to be able to capture that moment on our phone. It was a liberating moment for him – to realise he can help raise funds for other children with cancer."

Battle started in Primary 1

Joel with the tote bag with his artwork 'A Sunset That Makes A Difference!' Image source: Children's Cancer Foundation

Joel's battle with cancer started with a swollen lump on his arm when he was 7. Shortly after he started Primary 1, Joel was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia.

Says Marianne: "I remember the night before (the diagnosis), we were watching a TV programme on cancer, and he asked, 'What is cancer?'

"I didn't know how to explain it to him, and we were in the hospital awaiting the results of the biopsy."

Marianne says that the family has lost count of how many sessions of radiotherapy Joel had to undergo because of the many relapses he had over the years.

It also made his education journey a difficult one.

All through his school days, Joel only managed to complete one full school year (in Primary 5). The other years were all interrupted by the treatment sessions.

Nevertheless, he was determined to complete his school journey.

Image source: Marianne Lam / Facebook

Due to a relapse, Joel was undergoing chemo in the months leading up to the O levels. Marianne recounts how the night before his first paper, Joel came down with chickenpox and was rushed to A&E. But because he was determined to get into a polytechnic, he took all his exams at the hospital – even as he was hooked up to an intravenous drip.

It showed his willpower and he was still able to smile through the ordeal. Says Marianne: "When his mind is set on something, he goes all out to achieve it, and he did so well.

"He had actually already got a place at Nanyang Polytechnic through the direct admission programme, but he still wanted to do his O levels."

She adds: "Looking back, he didn't let his treatment define him nor deter him from doing what he set out to do. He didn't give up and rose to the occasion. It was one of the most epic episodes of his journey."

This same grit was seen by friends and family. Elaine Loke posted on Marianne's Facebook on how Joel inspired her. She said: "I clearly remember how Joel hopped up the flight of stairs to my house on his clutches. He did not want anyone to help him. He did it with all his might and happily. That's the spirit of Joel…always so happy and brave!

Never giving up and always rising above

Throughout the years, Joel had just one goal – to recover. And he cooperated with the doctors and endured all the treatments no matter how difficult it was.

It also bred in him an empathetic heart.

Marianne explains that during his treatment, Joel would see young babies and other children with cancer. "He never asked why he was the only one with cancer because he saw that he wasn't alone.

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"Joel was very affected by the younger ones diagnosed with cancer. When he was well, he would visit another patient who was wheelchair bound and home alone because the parents were at work. It helped Joel to help other kids. His treatment wasn't easy but he still appreciated what he had."

When Joel passed away, one of his doctors, who had looked after him for 10 years, wrote a heartfelt eulogy. He said: "The battles you endured would make even a grown man cry… I feel honoured and blessed to have known such a brave soul.

"I'll always remember one of the last conversations we had. You said, 'there's no point fussing, I don't have a bucket list, I've been to all the places I want to go, eaten all the food I want to try. I'm ready.' You said that at age 22."

Leaving behind hope and strength

In January 2020, Joel realised that he was not going to get better, but he refused to let the news deter him from living his life to the fullest.

San San, a social worker who helped Joel, tells The Pride: "Despite his pain and discomfort, he is always so pleasant. He believed in living in the moment and saw every day as a gift. He would always tell us to just go with the flow and not worry so much. He truly enjoyed every moment he had and lived life to the fullest till the very end."

Home Sweet Home

Marianne (left) and San San (right) showing some of Joel's artwork. Image source: Children's Cancer Foundation

She remembers a home visit when she asked Marianne and Joel about their family photographs. The stories that they told – about how cheeky Joel was as a little boy, how much he loved school and how his friends would push his wheelchair around – moved her.

"Joel told me about their precious family holidays, about his love for Japan and for food. And I was struck by how many things he managed to accomplish despite 15 years of disruptive treatment.

"That afternoon was very precious to me as I got to know Joel as a person, not as a patient… A young man with his own personality, hobby and dreams, not a man defined by illness."

In the last few months of his life, Joel was so sick, he could only draw.

That was when he decided to use his art to express his thanks to those who had supported him through the years, says Marianne.

"His wonderful team of doctors, nurses, his principal, teachers, doting aunties and uncles, friends, relatives and the Children's Cancer Foundation too, every one of them whom he was grateful to."

"Art became his oasis. He kept drawing on his tablet even though he was in pain, as his body was slowly shutting down."

Joel drew for his doctors, taking inspiration from natural landscapes during a family trip to Seattle.

Image source: Marianne Lam / Facebook

Says Marianne: “His spirit was upbeat. The many tranquil and colourful pictures he made in those last months speak of his restful spirit and we hope this simple gesture of making a bag would bring joy and hope to others in ways that we may not anticipate.”

Joel’s project came to fruition in June 2020 when his mum printed a drawing of his first and last sunset on a tote bag and it inspired him to ask her if it could be used to raise funds for CCF, which has provided the family with emotional support and financial counselling over the years.

CCF agreed but sadly, while Joel saw his tote bag printed, he passed away before they could be distributed to the community.

Nevertheless, Marianne tells the Pride: “My heart was heartened and encouraged when I saw and experienced the recipients’ joy upon receiving the gift from Joel. This was the catalyst that encouraged me to carry on his wish to raise funds and spread his joy to others.”

It wasn’t easy for her during this time, however. Marianne shares that she had never done a fundraiser and she had to continue her son’s project even as she was dealing with grief over his death.

“It wasn’t my plan to do it this way. Even when CCF’s help, I wanted to ‘chicken out’. I felt Joel’s loss so deeply. Then I remembered what he would say to me, ‘Go with the flow, with all the bad, good will come. Don’t get too paranoid, mum.’ It liberated me.

“That’s why here we are, sharing his story and overwhelmed by the joy of many that more people are being encouraged.”

Her driving force

Marianne shares with The Pride that Joel has been her biggest motivator to keep going despite the difficult journey: “His joy is so contagious despite all the ills he experienced that all you want to do with him is to create happy moments. Be grateful.”

She adds that a burden as tremendous as a cancer diagnosis needs support from family and the community at large. “This journey demands so much, no matter how capable you are, you really can’t walk this journey on your own.”

February 15 is International Children’s Cancer Day. If you’d like to help, visit Joel’s CCF fundraiser page here, which runs till Feb 28.

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Top Image: **Image source: Children Cancer Foundation**

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International Children's Cancer Day leukaemia Society

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