

THE STRAITS TIMES

Three-time cancer survivor, 20, has words of hope for others



Mr Gabriel Loh (centre), 20, hopes to share his story with those battling cancer, their loved ones, and survivors. PHOTO: CHILDREN'S CANCER FOUNDATION

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For most people, one cancer diagnosis is life-changing.

Mr Gabriel Loh heard the gut-wrenching news three times – at five, 14 and 17 years old.

In 2024, the 20-year-old was an ambassador for Hair for Hope, an annual campaign to raise funds and awareness of childhood cancer through getting participants to have their heads shaved for donations.

The three-time cancer survivor saw it as a good opportunity for him to share his story with those battling cancer, their loved ones, and survivors.

He said: “Since my strength is in finding hope in Jesus and the community which has rallied around me to give me support, I decided to shave my head for Hair for Hope this year.

“I am also glad to see that my friends from junior college registered as a group to shave their heads, and some of my relatives did their part to donate funds.”

The world came crashing down when four-year-old Gabriel was diagnosed with cancer in 2009, said his 51-year-old mother, who wanted to be known only as Mrs Loh.



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The Stage 4-neuroplastoma was located near his heart and lungs. The treatment took about a year, and entailed seven cycles of chemotherapy, with each hospital admission lasting three to five days.

One parent was always with him, while the other was with their other children – two older twins and the youngest child. Both his parents are educators.

In addition, he had to take medicine to age his cells that made the skin on his face and arms peel off. Mr Loh missed the whole of his K2 year in pre-school.

To give him a distraction from the pain, his parents bought him a Wii console so that he could channel his energy towards playing video games. They also let him have fast food in place of hospital food.

“Being able to spend time together as a family of six became most precious to us,” said his mother.

Mr Loh remained cancer-free for almost the next 10 years, though the family went through periods of anxiety when his scans came up, and joy when they were cancer-free.

Mr Loh's second brush with cancer was in 2018 when doctors found a tumour high up in his nose, near his brain and eyes.

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This time, he was old enough to grasp the gravity of his diagnosis. “I was worried about the side effects, being a burden to my parents and surviving cancer,” he said.

Moreover, he was afraid his IQ would be affected because of radiotherapy and surgery in the nose.

Admitted to the Singapore General Hospital for a week, he felt downcast.

Mr Loh recalled: “I felt helpless and also hopeless at times due to the aftereffects of the chemotherapy sessions.” He was also worried that his frequent hospital appointments would be disruptive to his studies.

Eventually, his parents took him to South Korea for proton therapy, which was not available in Singapore at that time, as an alternative to chemotherapy. Doctors said it would reduce the adverse effects of radiation on his brain and eyes.

All told, he had 34 sessions of treatment in 2019 spread out over two and a half months in South Korea. It cost the family more than \$90,000. But again, Mr Loh overcame this disruption to his life and managed to do well enough to enter junior college.

But just before his A-level mother tongue exam, he suffered a relapse of the second cancer outside the radiation zone. Once again he did not let it get in the way of his preparations, as he continued to study while going in and out of hospital for scans and treatment.

He said: “I was worried about the difficulty of coping in JC or whether I should take a gap year, but I managed to complete my A levels in 2023.” He added that his rock band co-curricular activity in JC helped him cope with his treatments’ side effects, as he found solace in playing music.

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The treatment was so hard on him that it altered his facial features quite a bit, said his mother. “At one time, I told the ENT (ear, nose and throat) surgeon I did not recognise my son any more,” she said.

But he put up a good fight each time he faced difficulties and the unexpected, she said.

“We are proud of him that he managed to enter university this year, and we are thankful for the support of teachers and school leaders of his secondary schools and JC,” she added.

Still, having to juggle school and recovering from cancer was not easy. Mr Loh said: “I think not many are aware that the survival post-cancer is very challenging.

“I found it quite hard to cope due to my affected memory as I forget easily, encounter short-term

memory loss and can even forget my train of thought throughout a conversation.

“I was so affected by this, as some of my friends might have misunderstood me for not being bothered to listen to what they were saying.”

Mr Loh said his parents and church community were instrumental in helping him through his recovery. The Children’s Cancer Foundation also supported and encouraged him by giving him a study award.

Hair for Hope is the foundation’s signature fund-raising campaign. It ended on Aug 18, having raised nearly \$5 million from more than 38,600 donors.

Mr Loh now wants to help others who are struggling just like him. He has volunteered at the Woodlands Social Centre and will be pursuing a social work degree at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

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