



Left: Madam Stephanie Phan with two of the art pieces done by her daughter Gillian Chen.

Above: Miss Chen at 14 when she was a visual arts student at School of the Arts. PHOTOS: KHALID BABA, ST FILE

A FULFILLING LIFE

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MADAM STEPHANIE PHAN

Artwork shaped by battle with cancer

Exhibition showcases eight pieces by Sota student who died of cancer last year

Jolene Ang

As a child, she had an artistic streak and loved experimenting with different ideas and creations.

When she was in Primary 3, she secretly quit her co-curricular activity, Chinese orchestra, to join the art club.

When Miss Gillian Chen got a place in the School of the Arts (Sota) after the PSLE, she was over the moon.

But in 2010, barely a week into her first semester, she was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer and had to use a wheelchair.

At the age of 12, life as she knew it had changed forever. It was art that she leaned on, to make sense of it all.

Miss Chen fought hard against the disease but relapsed six times, before it finally claimed her life in March last year. She was only 20.

Miss Chen was featured by The Straits Times in 2011, in a Children's Day piece on inspiring children.

Now, an exhibition of her works, presented by the Children's Cancer Foundation, is being held at 51 Waterloo Street. Through this, her family hopes to inspire others to pursue excellence, as Miss Chen did.

Her mother, Madam Stephanie Phan, told ST yesterday: "Despite

her pain, she embodied the spirit of excellence. She didn't want her work to be tainted by a medical lens, and no matter how sick she was, she always completed her work and never asked for deadline extensions."

Madam Phan runs a wet tissue manufacturing business with her husband. The couple are in their 50s. Madam Phan has been going to the exhibition every day since it opened last Saturday and will continue to do so till it ends on Sunday.

On display are eight of Miss Chen's works, done during her last two years at Sota. Many of the pieces were shaped by her experiences living with cancer.

For example, one work is a length of calico fabric – a plain-woven textile made from cotton that is unbleached and has not been fully pro-

cessed – with strands of Miss Chen's hair woven into it.

She lost her hair twice in 2010 and 2012 – due to the intense chemotherapy treatments – so every strand mattered. When her hair grew back, she would collect the strands she shed in the shower, even noting down the date and time.

Said Madam Phan: "Hair protects and covers the head, and to most, it's also a symbol of beauty. Everyone 'drops' hair every day, but who actually feels sentimental about it?"

The exhibition is the second time that Miss Chen's works are being showcased. The first time was in April 2017, when she was still alive.

Ms Liow Hwee Hsiang, assistant principal therapist at the Children's Cancer Foundation, said: "We wanted to reshowcase her work at the Grief and Bereavement Confer-

ence last year, but there was not enough space for the full collection, and Gillian had specified in her will that the works should be viewed in full together.

"Coincidentally, it has been almost two years since the first exhibition and about a year after she passed away, so we thought it was an opportune time."

Ms Liow, 45, who worked with Miss Chen for more than eight years, said she wanted Miss Chen's family to have something to remember her by.

"Gillian was someone who valued relationships – with friends, teachers, mentors, family," she said.

"She planned what would happen (after her death); she knew what she wanted. Her (informal) will was written in great detail and she distributed her possessions to those

around her," added Ms Liow, who received a handbag.

"Till the very end, when she was paralysed, she worried about being a burden to the people around her. She tried very hard not to complain or be negative about things."

Madam Phan said it has taken her some time to understand the gift her daughter left behind.

"I met her friends and talked to them, I read her journals," she said.

"(This whole journey) has helped me see that the length of your life does not determine the quality of it. Her life was short. But her suffering helped her to be focused and intent in her pursuits.

"I hope to share this with friends who visit the exhibition and I hope they see her art through her eyes."

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