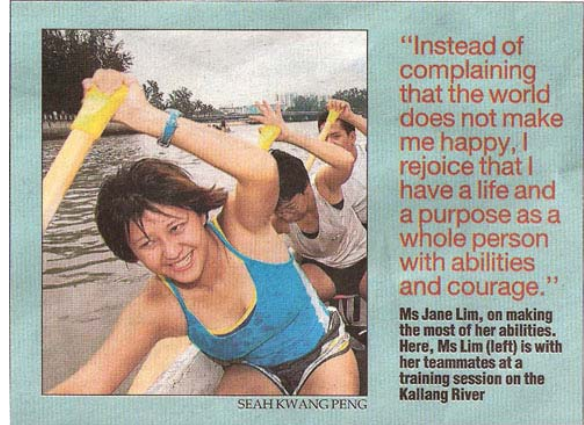


My Special Life

Making waves

Being hearing-impaired from birth has not stopped Jane Lim from becoming the team manager of a dragon boat team. **Theresa Tan** reports.



“Instead of complaining that the world does not make me happy, I rejoice that I have a life and a purpose as a whole person with abilities and courage.”

Ms Jane Lim, on making the most of her abilities. Here, Ms Lim (left) is with her teammates at a training session on the Kallang River

Jane Lim is a tanned, fit, young woman of 28 with a distinct air of confidence. As you speak, she watches intently, and with a mixture of gestures and speech, she responds.

She also carries a mobile phone and sends out over 1000 SMSes every month. Ms Lim has been fully hearing impaired, or deaf, since birth. She has severe impairment in her left ear and profound impairment in her right. The elder of two girls, she is the only hearing-impaired person in her family.

“When I was only a few months old, my mum used to call me to see if I would respond. But I seemed lost in my own world,” says Ms Lim, describing how her parents discovered her deafness. “After trying a few times, she got worried and decided to take me to the doctor to assess my hearing.

“That was the lowest point for my parents coming to terms with the fact that I am deaf.”

Her father bought her a hearing aid that enabled her to hear some sounds. “When my father tried calling my name, I quickly responded to his voice, which delighted my parents. That was when I started to accept my condition.”

Her parents were her pillar, going to great lengths to ensure she received speech therapy and a good education. “They inspired me a lot because they took the big step forward with love to see me through, despite the fact that I am deaf. They never saw me as a burden, but loved me.”

For Ms Lim, school was a relatively smooth journey. She went from a hearing kindergarten to a school for the deaf at primary level, and then she was integrated into the mainstream St Anthony’s Canossian Secondary School.

“At first I was very skeptical about my ability to cope in a mainstream school,” she admits. “Many of my classmates had to be very sensitive to my needs,

and tried their best to adapt to me. I also tried to adapt to the fast-paced learning environment.

Some teachers spoke too fast, so I was unable to catch what they were saying while reading their lips.”

However, her teachers would take time to give her extra lessons after school. “That was the start of my experience of integrating with hearing people. From there, I went on to Ngee Ann Polytechnic, where I studied and graduated with a diploma in building services engineering.”

Since graduating from polytechnic, Ms Lim has been working as a freelancer, providing manpower for events and projects. “I’d like to try different jobs this way before settling down to one good permanent job, she says. In fact, I am eager to start business within the next two years.”

Every Sunday, you will see Ms Lim at Kallang Basin with a bunch of fit,

tanned people: the HI-Raleigh Dragon Boat team. The team, comprising nine hearing-impaired and 15 individuals who can hear, was found by corporate trainer Chong Hai-Yen.

This year, Ms Chong handed the baton over to Ms Lim, who now serves as team manager.

The HI-Raleigh Dragoon Boat team participates in dragon boat races. In fact they are currently training for 10km race on Saturday.

Ms Lim started out as a rowe. "Initially, I had misconceptions that dragon boat racing was too tough. But after two of my friends kept persuading me to join I finally caved in."

"Jane has a great can-do spirit," says Ms Chong. "I saw that she was very spunky, and she takes initiative. She never lets her disability get in the way. Whatever others, even hearing persons, could do, she always felt she could do better."

Ms Lim now leads the team, which comprises an interesting variety of hearing-impaired individuals ranging in age from 20 to their 40s. This is a very unique group in the dragon boat community where hearing-impaired and people who can hear come together, she says.

Apart from dragon boat racing, the team also takes part in biathlons, triathlons and other races, and its members regularly have meals together.

The team takes races seriously. Training begins three to four months before the race. "We have to coordinate the basic paddling strokes first on land, because the deaf members cannot hear the instructions. Then we graduate to the different techniques to break the water and move the boat."

In the boat, the deaf crew must pair up with members who can hear. And they row in coordination by feeling the sound of the drum and following the beats, and as they feel the boat moving with rhythm, they paddle harder.

Being in the team has affected the hearing-impaired members positively – most of them have become outgoing and positive, and have gained confidence to try out other sports.

Dragon boat racing is more than just training and racing: It helps the individual to develop his self-confidence and to challenge himself to break limits. The principles in the teamwork in dragon boat racing can be applied to work environments as well, says Ms Lim.

And for her, dragon boat racing has helped her discover her potential and challenged her to turn her weaknesses into strengths. "Instead of complaining that the world does not make me happy, I rejoice that I have a life and a purpose as a whole person with abilities and courage. Venturing into the unknown elements has shaped my thinking and built my character."

For Ms Lim, who names Helen Keller as her inspiration and teacher, she has never felt handicapped. "If I did, I would only be short-changing myself. I have 20 to 50 years more to live. I'd like to leave a legacy of discovering uncharted territory and to inspire others.

As Helen Keller said: "Be of good cheer. Do not think of today's failures but of the success that may come tomorrow. You have set yourself a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere; and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles."

If you are interested in finding out about HI-Raleigh, contact Ms Jane Lim at citrusbe@yahoo.com