Mum tries to come to terms with son's death and finds purpose through new helpline

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Grief-stricken, Madam May Chng looked at Jarod as he lay, hooked to several tubes, in the intensive care unit of Changi General Hospital.

"I was just stroking his hand; I just kept *sayang*-ing him," she says, using the Malay word for showing deep love and affection. "Each time I touched him, I'd say sorry and asked him if I could have been a better mother."

Even though he was unconscious, her 18-year-old son obviously heard her because tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I knew then my son didn't want to go, didn't want to die. He just didn't know how to stop the pain and how to tell us," says the former science teacher.

Jarod Cheah died on April 2, 2013, 16 hours after he hanged himself.

By all accounts a goofy and bubbly teen, what he did enveloped his friends and loved ones in a tidal wave of shock and grief.

"He knows we love him, are supportive and reasonable. I still can't understand why. I just know that all must have been overwhelming for him that day," says Madam Chng, 56, who still uses the present tense when talking about the younger of her two sons.

More than six years have passed but she is still trying to come to terms with her loss.

"You are only the third person I have talked to about this. I have attended child bereavement support sessions but I could only say Jarod took his own life, not talk about what happened," she says.

Madam Chng now wants to more than move on; she wants to help prevent others, especially the young, from doing what Jarod did.

Early this month, she joined Brahm Centre to take charge of its newly launched Assist Line for Youths And Parents.

Founded by former technopreneur Angie Chew, Brahm Centre is a secular outfit which conducts courses on mindfulness and offers health education as well as emotional and mental support.

The helpline comes in the wake of a recent report in The Straits Times that the number of teenage boys who took their own lives hit a record high of 19 last year, the most since tracking of suicide figures began in 1991.

Suicide, according to the Samaritans of Singapore, is the leading cause of death among young people aged between 10 and 29. Last year, 94 of them took their own lives.

"Young people may think their pain ends when they end their life. But the pain is multiplied and intensified in the lives of many others who have to carry it for the rest of their lives," she says, adding that both she and her husband, a human resource professional, became suicidal and wrestled with depression after Jarod's death.

The family moved out of their old home after the tragedy because it held too many painful memories.

In their new condo in the east, Madam Chng has set up a corner for her lost son. The walls in this part of the house are painted green, Jarod's favourite colour. On one hangs a J-shape montage of images, put together by his cousins.

A soft-spoken and dignified woman, Madam Chng sheds tears and smiles in equal measure as she talks about Jarod, whom she describes as a witty and creative soul.

She and her husband – both graduates of the National University of Singapore – were fairly easy-going parents.

"We didn't give them too much pressure. Even though I was in education, I believed that students should learn something new, not just how to take tests and examinations," she says.

A generally happy child, Jarod hit a rough patch when he had to move to a new school because he did not do well in his Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE).

He was bullied.

"He was picked on because he spoke with an accent, probably from watching too much Sesame Street. He also liked to tell people what he thought, especially when he felt they were not doing things right," she says with a grimace.

"Some of his classmates made nasty comments and ostracised him. I wanted to tell his teacher many times but he begged me not to," she says, adding that schools could do more to tackle the issue of bullying.

One day, he told her that he was so miserable that he could not breathe. Madam Chng and her husband then decided to move to Hong Kong, where he had been offered a job.

Losing her son to suicide

In Hong Kong, Jarod settled well into life at the Australian International School. He made new friends, dated and pursued his interest in music, especially the guitar.

After a couple of years, Madam Chng returned with her two sons to Singapore.

"My elder son had to come back for national service," she says.

Although she did not ask him, Jarod seemed happy enough to return in 2010 too. By then, the accomplished guitarist was sure he wanted a career in music. He successfully auditioned for a place, via the music track, in an arts school.

He found himself a girlfriend he really liked, but, like many teen relationships, it was at times rocky and tempestuous.

Jarod's best friend Kevin (not his real name) wrote a chapter on him for Bend Not Break: Learning From Loss published in 2016 by Brahm Centre. Authored by surgeon Peter Mack, the book – using Jarod's story – explores youth depression and suicide.

In his essay, Kevin describes his friend as a naturally merry soul, who "had a way of putting people at ease and feeling comfortable with themselves".

But Jarod, he writes, was also not averse to displaying anger.

Madam Chng with Jarod, whom she describes as a witty and creative soul. Madam Chng now wants to not only move on but also to help prevent others, especially the young, from doing what Jarod did. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MAY CHNG

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"At times, he would punch the wall or glower to himself. However, such behaviours were not really indicative of there being anything wrong, as far as I knew."

The book also contained an essay by Jonathan Cheah, Madam Chng's elder son, chronicling his grief over his brother's death.

Now a 27-year-old lawyer, Mr Cheah wonders if his brother suffered from depression.

"To my mind, my brother was an ordinary teenager who lived a happy life or at least he appeared to," he wrote.

"He went to a school that, in my opinion, not only catered to his interests but also provided him with an intellectually stimulating and nurturing environment. He had many loving friends at school and seemed very happy to be there... So what shook him recently?"

Madam Chng says she has not read the essays.

"I just can't bring myself to," she says.

Jarod took his own life on a Monday, the day after Easter Sunday.

"We had a wonderful weekend," she recalls, adding that the family went to watch Django Unchained, a violent Western by film-maker Quentin Tarantino.

"Jarod was holding my hand and I remember telling him: 'So clammy'. My elder would never be seen in public holding my hand," she says, smiling at the recollection.

The day which changed her life forever began normally enough. As she dropped him off at his school, she said: "Good night, baby."

Bemused by her inexplicable gaffe, she laughed and corrected herself: "I mean, have a good day, baby. Love you."

Because he had to finish an important school project, Jarod did not join his family when they went out for dinner that night.

She knew he had been under stress because he really wanted to do well in his studies.

On their return, he came out of his room to greet them.

"His father had prepared dinner for him before we went out. I asked him if he had eaten. He said no and that he had work to do" she says.

Tearing, she adds: "I always asked him if he had eaten and how his meals were, but I seldom asked how he was feeling."

Jarod, she continues, went inside his room and locked the door, which he did not normally do.

Madam Chng went to take a shower but told her husband to remind Jarod to have his meal.

Her husband did, shortly after, but thought nothing was amiss when his son did not respond.

When she came out of the shower, Madam Chng knocked on his door and then sent a text message to Jarod.

Greeted by silence, she and her elder son forced open the door to be confronted by a harrowing sight.

She remembers screaming and holding on to her unconscious son's feet while his brother performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation while waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

The month following Jarod's death was pure hell for his family.

"I couldn't function at all. I couldn't breathe. I had flashbacks and panic attacks," says Madam Chng.

Jonathan left for England to study law. "He just wanted to be away for a while because we were so sad."

Her husband sought counselling but not her. She spent the next 12 months in a deep funk, holed up in a darkened room in their apartment in Hong Kong, where her husband was still working.

She read up on different religions.

"I just wanted to know where he was and how to get to him," she says with a wan smile.

When she and her husband returned to Singapore, she went back to work as a vice-principal in a primary school for three years until 2017.

"I just wanted to throw myself into work to forget the past," she says.

Because she had not properly processed her grief, it took very little to trigger bouts of weeping.

By then, Jonathan had returned to sit his Bar exams. Because she wanted to be well enough to take care of him, she started seeing a counsellor.

It helped, and led to other things: attending child bereavement support groups, water-colour painting classes, community gardening sessions and mindfulness workshops.

"I'm not completely fine but I decided I needed to do something other than focus on rumination," says Madam Chng, who started reading up on teen suicides and how countries like the United States and Canada are tackling the issue.

Inspired by a Sunday Times article earlier this year about how Ms Chew gave up a high-flying tech career to start Brahm Centre, she applied to join the outfit.

Ms Chew assigned her to start the new helpline for youth and parents, and paired her with a psychologist and a researcher.

Speaking through tears, Madam Chng implores young people who are troubled to seek help.

"You are not alone. We all have issues. You do not have weakness of character if you seek help. And mental issues are not taboo. When we are not well, we go to a doctor to get better, don't we?"

Parents should be more vigilant; they cannot be too dismissive, she adds.

"The world they live in is very different from ours. It is much more fast-paced and complex."

With a sad smile, she recalls how she and Jarod once lay on the grass in their garden, looking up at the stars in the sky.

"There were some news reports about teen suicide and I made him promise that he would never do such a thing because he and his brother were the best things that had happened to me.

"He said: 'I promise'."

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HELPLINES

BRAHM CENTRE ASSIST LINES:
6655-0000 (office hours)
8823-0000 (WhatsApp and after office hours),
callme@brahmcentre.com (e-mail)

SAMARITANS OF SINGAPORE:
1800-221-4444 (24 hours)
Mental Health Helpline:
6389-2222 (24 hours)

SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH:
1800-283-7019

TINKLE FRIEND (FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN):
1800-274-4788

CARE CORNER COUNSELLING HOTLINE (MANDARIN):
1800-353-5800