Muscling her way past weak muscles

Nurulasyiqah's own disability does not stop her from helping others. Theresa Tan finds out what life is like for her.

Nurulasyiqah Mohammed Taha is an overachiever by any standard. The former Raffles Girls Secondary and National Junior College student has held numerous leadership positions. She is currently the assistant director for events management at the Rotaract Club of the Singapore Management University and head of student development for SMU's Malay Language and Cultural Club.

Syiqah, 20, is also a volunteer at the Muscular Dystrophy Association, organising outings and mentoring students for its fund-raising projects.

Her community service includes participation in the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's Youth Helping Youth programme, mentoring Secondary 3 students for the Gift of Sight Project and the SMU Rotaract Club's Child@Stmstll-Making Cents project, which teaches money management.

She has won numerous community awards for her contributions, including the Friend of Singa Award, and she was also involved in a Singapore International Foundation expedition to Perak, where she did inter-personnel planning to help the community train as tourist guides.

That's more achievements than the average adult can boast. And yet this bright 20-year-old has spinal muscular atrophy, a neuromuscular disease in which muscles weaken and waste away due to the degeneration of motor neurones (nerve cells in the spinal cord).

Syiqah is one of three scholars to receive the inaugural Society for the Physically Disabled-Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Scholarship last year. She was selected because of her outstanding academic performance and her commitment to helping the less fortunate. She uses a motorised wheelchair to move around as her arms and feet are weak. She is unable to get herself out of bed — her mum carries her out every morning and gets her ready for school — and lifts her into bed too.

For Madam Katijah, 57, a housewife who used to be a producer for the former RTV (now MediaCorp), the birth of Syiqah was bittersweet. Madam Katijah and her retired teacher husband had tried for 12 years before they conceived her. When they discovered that their daughter could not walk at 12 months, they took her to Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

The problem could not be determined, but Syiqah began physical therapy and had to use a leg frame and special shoes to help her stand. But she only got weaker. Finally, she could no longer walk nor stand.

"I cried till I had no tears," admits Madam Katijah. "The thought of the future, that I would have to face all the difficulties... She is my shadow; there must be someone to attend to her all the time. I have to be strong physically and mentally — she is 40kg. Last month really worries me. I pray to God to give me strength."

School time gives her some much-needed respite.

"The longer she stays in school the better. At least I can cook and bathe. I don't have freedom to go here and there. Everything needs to be planned." Planning is very much a daily routine. In fact, Syiqah's choice of the schol for the Disabled has long been determined by which has the most suitable facilities. She started out in RGS Primary, but because her mother was pregnant with her younger sister and could not cope with travelling every day to and from their home in Bedok, she transferred to Bedok Primary.

After she attended RGS, Madam Katijah wanted to place Syiqah in Temasek Junior College, but they had no ramps, so she went to NJC, where ramps were fitted for full access. Similarly, SMU was chosen above the National University of Singapore, simply because NUS' slopes are steep. But it is obvious from talking to Syiqah that her physical condition is a not an issue with her. "It's part of me, I was born so. It's different from if you met with an accident. It's difficult for me to imagine that I'm disabled."

All her friends are able-bodied. "I forget that people view me as someone in a wheelchair," she says.

Syiqah says she is never bothered emotionally by her condition. It's the physical barriers that are tough to get around, but even they don't stop her having fun.

The family (Syiqah's younger sister and brother are still in school) travel overseas often and she has fond memories of Melbourne, where buses have wheelchair access.

Every Saturday, she plays Boccia — a form of petanque for the handicapped which involves throwing a ball as close to a marker ball as possible — at the Cerebral Palsy Centre and hopes to take part in the Singapore Open.

If there is one thing that Syiqah anticipates being a challenge, it's finding a good job. "It will be a trial and error process, so I guess I'll learn through life itself," she said.

Madam Katijah began to deal better with having Syiqah after she joined the Asian Women's Welfare Association and met other parents who had children with other problems. She has met parents who leave their disabled children at home instead of exposing them to society.

"Parents should not feel like the world is crumbling around them. Be open about it and try to get help so that you can learn how to cope. Don't keep your child at home; let her go out."

---

**SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE DISABLED**

The SPD-Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Scholarship rewards physically disabled students for their outstanding academic achievements and encourages them to aspire to higher levels of educational attainment.

The scholarship is open to students with physical disabilities attending local universities only. Every year, two scholars are selected and a quantum of $11,000 per year awarded to each until completion of the course.

The Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) also offers career guidance and counselling to the scholars. The SPD-Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Scholarship is made possible by the sponsorship of Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation. Applications are welcome.

For more information, call the Society for the Physically Disabled on 6323-2303, or log on to www.spd.org.sg