

A Little Story to Share
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Abstract: An autobiographical article of a physically disabled person from Malaysia.

Key Words: Malaysia, education, equal rights

I have Osteogenesis Imperfecta, also known as Brittle Bone Disease. Wheelchair user since a very bad fall at the age of 7. As a person with only a physical disability, my parents couldn't enroll me in the existing schools that the Malaysian government provided. There are special schools for the visual and hearing impaired, and spastic centres for the mentally impaired. But as there are no special schools for the physically disabled, and most "normal" schools are unequipped with facilities for the wheelchairs, like ramps or special toilets, people with only physical disabilities are often being slighted or left out. And often, as in my case, no school even dared take me in for fear of having to shoulder the responsibilities should any accident or mishaps happen to me in their compound.

Within the Malaysian education system, without a high school qualification, my hope of entering into colleges or universities to do a full-time degree course in music will never be realized, whether or not I'm musically qualified to do so.

I'm now an Associate diploma holder in music, under Trinity College of Music, London's external diploma programme. Most music centres hired teachers even before they reach diploma level, but knowing the discrimination I'll face, I only started job hunting when I got my diploma certificate in hand. With the numerous interviews and auditions that I've gone through, what is most disheartening is not the people who turned me down straight for reasons of inaccessibility, as most class rooms are on the upper floors of shophouses, but the hypocrites that never forget to be understanding, but never from the very start intended to hire me. It's not just disheartening but worrying that people who are supposed to guide and develop the talents and potentials of young minds are themselves judging by the disabilities and not the capabilities of an individual.

A friend whom I just got to know related her experiences to me as a way to encourage me not to give up or feel disheartened by the little setbacks that I've faced. The first thing she said to me was, "There's nothing as called fairness or justice in this world. And being disabled, this is the reality that we have to face, and fighting back for our rights is our only options next to giving up."

As a person with physical deformity herself, she's had her fair share of difficulty in finding jobs. When she finally found herself hired by a small manufacturing plant, her boss was so nice to her up to the point of asking her to stay for dinner. But with the intention of wanting her to help tutor his son afterwards. Which often extends to 8 at night, when her job as a clerk only runs till 5PM. Not only was she taken advantage of for doing the jobs of both clerk and home tutor for the pay of one, her boss eventually insisted on her doing his son's homework instead of only guiding him. And that's when she put both her feet down and quit in the name of integrity and dignity. She's now working in a rehabilitation organisation, from a clerk to her post as assistant manager now. A place she's devoted herself to for the past 30 years, where the disabled people she

has worked with has grown to love and trust her like a friend and family and a job in which she'd garnered both self-esteem and respectability from her superiors.

And this is the reason she fully encourages me to take up the challenge of music tutor in a disabled centre. Not only would I have the chance to fully utilize and develop my love of music, being disabled myself, I would also have the chance to share my sentiments with so many other disabled people and bring our music to another level where we can establish a performing troupe for ourselves as well as the plan of setting up a new art centre specially for the disabled in the future.

My hope as a disabled person for all disabled people in Malaysia is the right to be treated equally. And to ceased being regarded as the less fortunate or the needy, terms which are not just belittling but totally disillusioning the public into perceiving the disabled as objects to be sympathised with or a burden to the society and community at large. And being a person deprived of education, I plea the need of providing education to all people, the physically, mentally, as well as the socially discluded. And a barrier free environment that not only goes to enforcement of ramps and accessibility in public buildings but also in all public facilities like roads and transports. As well as educating the public about the existence of the disabled, like creating more programmes and campaigns that allows the disabled and the able-bodied the opportunity of working together as equal. And one very sad fact in Malaysia is the lack of chance for the disabled people to represent themselves in disabled society and communities.

Often people with no experiences of working with the disabled are elected or selected to represent us in committee meetings, and often proposals are only good on paper, but totally impractical and not really serving to disabled peoples' needs and benefits. And the saddest circumstances are the organisations or foundations that started out with good intentions but slowly got into the wrong hands and more often than not either turned out to be social gatherings for the upper classes, where fundings are often squandered on the numerous dinings and discussion meetings on ways to help the needy but always end up with no result whatsoever, or where money raised in fundraisings or charity events are being corrupted by conscience-less people for their own personal gain.

I hope to see the swift enforcement of education to all people. I hope just as much that disabled persons will be given the power and funds to act on behalf and represent their own disabilities. No matter how much an observer claims to understand the person that's being observed, the observer still stands an observer. And what gives anyone the right to observe another person in the first place?

Lee-chin Heng is a Certified associate diploma holder in music. She is currently working as a piano accompanist in a ballet school. Lee-chin will be taking up the post as music tutor in a disabled centre, that will be giving free music tuition to all disabled people. She will also oversee the music department of an art troupe that plans to travel to Taiwan by the middle of 2004, and the music department of an art centre for the disabled to be ready by 2005. We welcome people from all walks of life, disabled or otherwise, to join our music classes. Anyone interested in visiting our centre or just to know more about us can email Lee-chin at lc_h02@yahoo.com or our centre at bgcentre@yahoo.com.