

GenerationGrit

Born blind, he helps others 'see' with tech



Mr Chia Hong Sen with his guide dog, Clare. The 22-year-old SIM undergrad teaches other people with visual impairment how to use technology to aid them in their daily lives. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

Chia Hong Sen was five before he realised he was different from other children. But being born blind in a seeing world has given him insights he would not otherwise have had, the 22-year-old undergraduate tells *The Straits Times* in a series about inspiring millennials.

Tan Tam Mei

Like a typical undergraduate, Mr Chia Hong Sen can often be found tapping away on his smartphone, attending lectures or hanging out with his friends on campus.

But Mr Chia, 22, who will soon start his third year at the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), might not have the typical world view of someone his age.

Born with a condition called retinal dystrophy, he has only ever been able to see lights and shadows, and cannot see letters or colours.

He said being born blind in a seeing world has bred in him resilience, enabling him to see challenges where others might see setbacks.

While things like navigating to places might be effortless for someone with sight, he has to put in the extra effort to learn and memorise routes, and rely on passers-by for help when taking public transport.

"But this puts things in perspective and I've learnt not to sweat the small stuff," said Mr Chia, who has a 12-year-old sister. His father is an electrician and his mother is a housewife. Both are 50. He is not the first member of his family to be born visually impaired. He has an aunt and uncle who have similar conditions.

Last year, to help him get around more easily, Guide Dogs Singapore gave him a two-year-old Labrador retriever named Clare.

"We spend every waking moment together. I care for her daily needs and she takes care of me as I make my way around," said Mr Chia, who

no longer uses a white cane but relies on Clare to look out for him.

He also wants to give back to society, which led him to volunteer at the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped while he was in polytechnic. Last year, he started working there part-time, teaching others with visual impairment to use technology that can aid them in their daily lives.

"Computers and smartphones nowadays come in-built with assistive technology, and the idea is to equip visually impaired clients with the necessary skills to use them," said Mr Chia, whose degree will be in IT management.

For example, he teaches them various keyboard commands that allow them to use computers, and specific gestures on smartphones so they can read texts and make calls. He said: "With various software, we can do most things that other people can do, such as writing a report, surfing the Net and checking e-mails."

The desire to better the lives of the visually impaired is also why he has a keen interest in technology.

While being blind has always been the "norm" for him, he first realised he was not like other people during an art class in pre-school when he was about five years old.

GENERATION GRIT

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"The teacher told us to colour within the lines, but of course I couldn't tell where the lines were. I couldn't even tell the colours apart," he said adding that up till then, he had thought colours were a spectrum of light to dark patches.

He realised how things were different for him only when he told his grandparents about the incident.

"They told me about my condition, but I was quite young and couldn't understand it," he said. "It was my normal, and not a sudden revelation that I was blind."

He attended Lighthouse School and Bedok South Secondary School, both of which cater to children with visual impairment. It was at these schools that he learnt how important technology was to people like him. Classroom materials were prepared in Braille, a tactile writing system, or using special assistive technology that converted text to speech.

Upon entering Temasek Polytechnic (TP) in 2013, Mr Chia started facing difficulties in school, where he had to find ways to get the materials he needed for his lectures and for classes that were converted to a format that was suitable for him. He was the first student with total visual impairment to join TP.

"Some people have the misconception that it's hard for the visually impaired to make it to tertiary education but, with the help of the school and those around them, it's possible to learn and study like any other person," he added.

For example, materials like worksheets or lecture notes had to be converted into special soft-copy formats that were compatible with text-to-speech or Braille readers.

This meant that it sometimes took longer for him to get the materials he needed to study or revise. "It was frustrating at first, but slowly I got used to it. And sometimes, before I even asked, lecturers would have already prepared the materials for me before class."

The experience also allowed him to let SIM and its lecturers know beforehand how they could help him when he entered the university. To help Mr Chia, SIM lecturer Jon Quah, who taught him in an information systems management class last year, took time to explain all the coursework diagrams to him.

Dr Quah, who is in his 50s, said it was encouraging to see how eager Mr Chia was to learn and persevere. Said Mr Chia: "I may face challenges because I cannot see, but even normal people who have sight face their own challenges as well. That is life, and part of it is working through challenges and finding solutions."

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