

No bones about it ...

When life presents Jeremy Lim an obstacle, he makes the detour count for something

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by Sheralyn Tay

He had grand ambitions of becoming a genetic scientist, delving into the mysteries of the human genome and extracting its secrets. So when it came to junior college, Jeremy Lim chose the Sciences route.

But the teen who was born with brittle-bone disease quickly found out that he couldn't wrap his head around chemistry. "I couldn't grasp the abstract nature of it," he says, waving his hands expressively. So after a year of struggle, he made the switch to Arts and found his element.

"It was a little bit of a disappointment, but I wouldn't call it a waste," he reflected on the extra year he spent in Temasek JC as a result. "It did let me find my true passion - literature and the arts." That is just typical Jeremy, viewing all detours as serving to make life all the more interesting.

These days the young man, who is reading literature and learning Japanese as he pursues his arts degree at the National University of Singapore, is happy making plans to become a translator or to own a Japanese toy shop one day. And to write books. Turning 21 this month, he has launched his autobiography - with a personage no less than President S R Nathan contributing the foreword. But then, Jeremy is no stranger to writing nor to long-time readers of this newspaper.

Beginning in 2004 when he was just 14, he contributed regular column pieces to Today for two years. His pieces, which often elicited letters from readers and on occasion were even cited by politicians, gave his perspective on issues ranging from school bullies to social graciousness and treatment of the disabled - the last an issue understandably close to his heart.

While he is now officially an adult, Jeremy hasn't lost that positive, quick-witted persona that endeared him to readers, peppering our conversation with inspirational quotes and cheeky quips. He refers to himself, for instance, as that "round" little boy confined to his "two-wheeled Ferrari".

Since taking a break from writing for the paper to concentrate on school (he stopped in 2006 about the time he entered JC), Jeremy has earned a Gold National Youth Achievement Award and attained a yellow belt in taekwondo (he performs only the arm movements), among other things. He began writing his autobiography, which was a year in the making, in his first year in university.

To accommodate his wheelchair, Temasek JC had built ramps and even installed a lift. At NUS, Jeremy had to learn to negotiate the maze of corridors to get from one lecture theatre to another. Mum Wong Liang Ming helps to wheel him around or even drive him to classes that are more out of the way.

The close bond between them is obvious - during the interview he turns to mum to clarify a fact or fill in a forgotten name. Of his parents, both taekwondo champions, he says: "They never gave up on me and took care of me like a normal child. Despite the

hardship (of dealing with my medical condition), they persevered. They believed in exposing me to different life experiences, such as travelling, reading, writing, to broaden my mind."

He enjoys normal youthful pursuits like going to the movies with friends, collecting Japanese anime figurines (he plans to major in Japanese studies), and losing himself in crime, thriller, science-fiction and fantasy books. But in other ways, his life has been almost extraordinary - like Forrest Gump, a friend remarked.

As a former young ambassador for the NKF Children's Medical Foundation, Jeremy rubbed shoulders with politicians and celebrities. Recalling his first meeting with President Nathan in 2002 at an event, he says: "I was feeling anxious as we waited; I wondered what he would be like. President Nathan was so friendly and kind ... I was blown away by how humble he was. There is a phrase, 'The greatness of a man is measured by how he connects with the little people' - and in this case it was with a fat boy."

Over the years, he says, he has from time to time received gifts of books and chocolates, letters and emails of encouragement from Mr and Mrs Nathan.

As for the future, you never know where it will take you, says Jeremy. "My dreams are still evolving ... As long as I get to do anything to do with my passions, multimedia, IT or animation would be fantastic. If it's something I like, I won't have to work a day in my life." For now, he chuckles cheekily: "I am thinking of going to a bookstore and buying my own book to see the reaction of the cashier!"

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