

FEATURES

Hope lost, dignity found

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See Tho initially picked up web design so he could work freelance from home.--Picture by Sandra Choo/Today, SINGAPORE, July 9 — He lost his mother at age five and his father at 15, but Martin See Tho was determined not to let that set him back in life.

With the support of two older sisters, he sailed through Victoria School, earned a Mechanical Engineering degree from the National University of Singapore, and landed a job at Diethlem Engineering, before proposing to the woman in his life, Sandra Choo, who he had met at NUS.

Said Choo: “I was attracted to Martin because of his talents, ambition, commitment and sincerity in going all out to win my heart.” They married in February 1998.

His career was thriving; designing the facade of the Rendezvous Hotel was just one of the many projects on his plate.

But towards the end of 1998, See Tho began tripping and falling down unexpectedly at work.

He was plagued with double vision, back pain and weakness in his limbs. It became dangerous for him to visit work sites, so he quit to become a trainee teacher instead.

“He was a very tough man; he felt he could overcome the illness on his own,” recalled his wife. “He would tell me he was okay, he was on the mend. We probably underestimated the extent of his condition.”

Traditional treatments and physiotherapy only bought brief respite from the pain. He began to walk with lurching movements that got him mistaken for a drunkard.

In 1999, after being referred to a neurologist, he was diagnosed with Machado Joseph Disease — a progressive muscular degenerative disorder that eventually leaves patients with no muscle control in their extremities. He was only 30 years old.

In an article he contributed in 2008 to Creative Life, a publication of the Singapore Soka Association, See Tho described the helplessness he felt. “My whole world collapsed when I got to know that ... the symptoms would worsen with the passage of time,” he wrote.

“I felt I had been given a death sentence. I became hysterical... broke down and cried uncontrollably.”

But his stubborn nature, again, surfaced. He did not tell his wife the full news. “I tried to stay positive, firmly believing that my condition would improve with medication and strong prayers,” he wrote.

He hid the truth from Sandra, too, when he had to quit working as a trainee teacher because standing long hours in front of a class became too exhausting and painful.

He continued leaving the house each morning, so that she wouldn’t find out. Unable to pay the premiums, he let his insurance policies lapse.

But by March 2001, he could no longer keep matters secret. His world had darkened with his increasingly blurred eyesight, and every step caused him excruciating pain. He could not do without a wheelchair.

When he confessed it all to Choo, she told Today, “I felt betrayed and hurt that he did not reveal the true extent of his illness to me. Whenever I had tried to speak to him about it, it would lead to a lot of contention between us, so I’d stopped asking. But I always thought he was able to recover.

“To be frank, all I wanted then was to walk out of his life, as all the promises he had made to me and our son were not true.”

And she did walk out the door with their infant. But as she dithered in the playground downstairs figuring out her next step, she got an SMS from her husband: It was a farewell message.

She went back upstairs to find him trying to jump out of a window. “It was then that I knew I couldn’t leave. For the sake of our son, I decided we must stay strong and fight on,” said Choo.

Financially, they were in trouble. There were medical bills and housing loans to pay on Choo’s sole paycheque as an IT project manager. They sold their five-room flat and downgraded to a four-room one.

Determined to do his part, See Tho hunted for a job despite being in a wheelchair. He was overjoyed to be hired as a clinical coder at a hospital.

With little knowledge of the medical terms he encountered keying patient case sheets into a computer, he would cart home thick tomes and painstakingly pore over them. Said Choo: “He was a fast learner, and in just a few months he was very competent and taking on complicated cases.”

Faced with mounting bills, Choo repeatedly appealed to her husband to apply for assistance from the Society of the Physically Disabled (SPD). But he adamantly refused to be labelled as ‘disabled’.

Then came the day she got a call from See Tho’s supervisor, informing her that he had been let go for his own safety. Apparently, with loss of muscle control, he had been falling out of his wheelchair frequently.

Confined at home, See Tho picked up web design so he could work freelance. But the disease soon left him incapable of even the most basic functions.

He wrote: “Imagine how terrible and helpless I felt as I started to lose those abilities that were once so naturally mine — my career, freedom, money, dignity, the ability to speak clearly and to even swallow food ... to sleep soundly, to stand or sit, to balance myself, to see clearly, to breath smoothly with my lungs, to distinguish colours and contrast — I was beginning to lose them one by one, as days went by.”

On occasions, he fell down while Choo was at work.

“He would call me as he could not pick himself up — and when I returned home two hours later, he would still be exactly where he fell. There were also times when he bled profusely from severe cuts and I had to rush him to the hospital,” she said.

In 2005, See Tho finally relented and applied to the SPD for therapy subsidies. But what he also found was hope, through the IT courses organised by SPD and Digital Art Social Enterprise (DASE).

Using Adobe Photoshop, See Tho began digital painting.

In 2006, his art pieces were picked for an exhibition along with works of other DASE artists. He wrote: “Each and every one of them was completed with my heart and soul.

Through them, I could feel a sense of dignity, a sense of achievement rather than being seen as a ‘disabled’ person, treated with mere sympathy.”

In 2006, a bad lung infection landed him in hospital for three months. Choo was advised to put him in a nursing home to be cared for.

She cried when she brought him to the Sri Narayana Mission Home for the Aged. But a composed See Tho joked that he could finally live in a landed property with a big garden, a big computer room and caregivers.

Dreaming of one day exhibiting his pieces again and collating them into a book, he would sit with a bulky Dell laptop on loan from the SPD, and lose himself in a palette of colours, lines and shapes, created layer by layer in Photoshop. “Sometimes, he would draw the same line 10 times before he was happy with it,” said Choo.

To surprise him, Choo worked with DASE and an IT training centre, adamsapple, to organise a solo exhibition for her husband. In 2007, Sentient Light was held at the National Library.

In March 2009, See Tho, 40, was admitted to hospital for the last time. He was gasping and cushions had to be wrapped around his skeletal legs to stop them knocking against each other.

The sight of his father hooked up to machines frightened their son, and Choo stopped bringing him on visits. “But at the last lap, everything fell into place. He was resting peacefully when my son arrived, and they were able to say their final goodbyes.”

That was also the night she finally, after all these years, told her husband: “I love you.” The next day, he died.

It was only after his death that Choo discovered her husband had completed another 110 digital paintings, all in three short years — a prolific achievement for any artist.

Vowing to exhibit all 160 of his works, she held a tribute exhibition in 2010. The proceeds from 82 canvas prints sold were donated to four charitable organisations. This month, another 30 works will be on show at the School of the Arts, where there will be a visual presentation of his story and art. — Today