

LIVING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Yip takes the positives from her disability and enjoys living her life to the fullest

May Chen

In medical terms, the condition that has Yip Pin Xiu labelled as a person with a disability is muscular dystrophy, the progressive weakening and wasting away of muscles.

In reality, it feels more like a thief unjustly stealing strength from a victim who is helpless through it all.

Living with the condition since she was two, Yip has seen this unwelcome intruder manifest itself slowly, but surely.

It took her off her feet at age 13, sentencing a bubbly teenager permanently to a wheelchair. It led to a loss of about 10kg of muscle mass over a short year after the 2008 Beijing Olympics where she became the first – and still the only – Singaporean to win a Paralympic gold.

It slowed her, from 56.62sec in the 50m backstroke in 2009 to 1min 16.16sec last month. Both are world records in their respective classes but a world of difference for a competitive swimmer who obsesses over each fraction of a second.

Yet, despite all that has been taken from her, the 23-year-old has neither been robbed of life, nor has she misplaced her natural optimism.

She said: "Even though I'm disabled and I cannot do a lot of things in life that require motor skills, I still feel I'm independent enough and I'm happy with what I can do."

Instead of bemoaning the disabilities that grow with a deteriorating condition like hers, Yip celebrates the experiences and people it has brought into her life.

It led her to swimming, sparking both passion and purpose in the self-declared introvert.

Said The Straits Times' Star of the Month for December: "Only when I started swimming did I start going out to meet people and slowly learn that actually, life is not that bad."

"If I were not in the situation I'm in now, I'd probably be at home with no friends."

It is with friends that she now goes traipsing around town, satisfying her sweet tooth. It is also with pals, like team-mate and best friend Theresa Goh, that she finds companionship in taking a literal leap of faith – the duo went skydiving white on holiday in Australia last year.

The adrenaline junkie still has para-sailing and snorkelling on her bucket list.

She said: "It doesn't matter whether you're disabled or not. It's about your perspective in life. There's always an alternative way to do things."

Like balancing her mobile phone on the edge of one palm then tapping at it with a knuckle on her other hand to send messages. Or clasp a glass in between her hands when she takes a sip of water.

That is not to say that the final-year Singapore Management University undergraduate does not have things she sometimes wishes she could do.

Stand, so that she can perhaps twirl her dress and do a little jiggle. Walk, so that she can feel for herself the pained experience of being in heels.

But she never allows these hopes to upset her.

"It's how you look at things – there's always a bright side," she said. "A lot of people can't find passion in life, and I feel living life without zest or passion would be sadder than living it with a disability."

"So I just try to live every day to the fullest and be happy about it."

For now, Yip lives for each training session in the pool, gruelling as they may be in the lead-up to the Paralympics.

The Rio Games are all she is focused on now, so important that for the first time in her athletic career, Yip felt the need and desire to defer her studies so that she can devote herself wholly to one target.

As a world record holder, she feels pressured to deliver come September. But just as she always has with everything that has threatened to steal joy from her life, that natural optimism of hers will apply.

She said: "Whatever happens in Rio and after that – there can be no bad outcome. There might be 'bad' ones, but it's just how I look at life. And I will choose to look at it from a positive manner."

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OPTIMISM

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YIP PIN XIU on why she feels that living life with passion is of utmost importance.