



Mr Justin Kueh holds Grade 8 certification in double bass and piano, and was a recipient of the Music Elective Scholarship. He excelled in music despite needing hearing aids, having difficulty making out higher-pitched sounds, and having trouble distinguishing instruments being played at the same time. ST PHOTO: JASON GOAH

GenerationGrit

Hearing loss didn't stop him from achieving musical success

Despite suffering from severe hearing loss, Mr Justin Kueh excelled in music and in school. This is the latest in a series on millennials who inspire us by overcoming the odds.

Goh Yan Han

There are 88 keys on a standard piano, but 21-year-old Justin Kueh can barely hear the 20 in the highest octaves. Even if he did hear them, they would sound the same. He has severe to profound hearing loss, which is mitigated by hearing aids, but he still struggles with sounds in the higher frequencies. Yet, he holds Grade 8 certification in piano and double bass, and was a recipient of the Music Elective Scholarship, which is given to a select few students at Integrated Programme schools or junior colleges. He also scored a sterling 42 out of 45 in the International Baccalaureate examination.

On top of that, he was on the dean's list in his first two years at university, and is a recipient of the Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Scholarship for Persons with Disabilities, which recognises outstanding special needs students. Currently a third-year student at Singapore Management University, Mr Kueh was about two years old when doctors diagnosed his hearing loss, which was most likely congenital.

His mother, Madam Sharon Tan, 50, said that the condition was not picked up earlier at regular check-ups with a general practitioner. "But we were worried when, at about two years of age, he did not really speak or react to us when we called," said Madam Tan, a marketing manager.

His father, Mr Gary Kueh, 50, is head of licensing and partnership at a software company.

After he was diagnosed, Mr Kueh was enrolled in Canosaville Preschool, which caters to children with hearing loss.

When the time came for primary school, however, his parents decided that he should go to a regular school to meet other kids his age.

When his brother, Ryan, who is a

year older, started taking piano lessons, so did Mr Kueh.

He remembers his first impression when he tagged along with his mother to buy a piano. A man in the music shop was playing Chopin's Revolutionary Etude, a piece he was unfamiliar with. "I thought he was just super cool. At such a young age, seeing someone play something so complex, it really hooked me," said Mr Kueh, who was six years old at the time.

He began to listen to more classical music, and practised more enthusiastically than his sibling did. "The piano helps me to relax. There is a sense of satisfaction in learning a new piece or creating a pleasant tune."

In secondary school at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), he was tasked to learn the double bass as part of his Music Elective Programme, for which he was recommended by a teacher.

He remembers his first concert as a Secondary 2 student in the ACS (I) Philharmonic Orchestra for the school's Founder's Day. He was awed by the size of the audience.

He said: "I was worried that I would not play well, but the thing about the orchestra is that you always have someone to look to, or someone supporting you, or you're supporting someone."

"I knew if I made a mistake, my section would be strong enough to continue playing."

Currently, he plays recreationally and at performances with amateur orchestras or charity concerts when he can fit them into his schedule. He is studying politics, law and economics, with a second major in strategic management.

With the help of hearing aids, Mr Kueh is able to get by with his disability undetected most of the time.

But he cannot make out noises that people without hearing problems take for granted – for example, the sound of a dropped coin hitting the ground, the rustling of

leaves, and even fire alarms. He had to overcome issues when playing music as well.

He has trouble discerning instruments from one another when they are played at the same time, and identifying the melody in higher-pitched instruments such as the piccolo, flute or violin – skills he needed for the Music Elective Programme.

So it was through hard work and some ingenuity that he scored an A1 in the O-level examination. To cope, especially in exams, he used earphones to blast the music, and the school allowed him to download an equaliser app to turn up the volume for the high-pitched frequencies during tests.

All this distorted the original music, but that was how he would work around the small obstacles to still do well in school.

Mr Kueh never felt sorry for himself. "While others might feel I am disadvantaged due to my disability, I wouldn't describe myself as such. I focus on my own problems and how to overcome them, and ask for help if I need it."

"In my cohort, there was another bassist, who was just super talented. Rather than feel like I was not playing as well as him due to my disability, I just thought to myself, I have to learn from him, and in the end, he helped me to improve."

He would frequently record his practices and ask his friend, Mr Ian Shum, for constructive criticism.

Mr Shum, 22, a first-year chemical engineering student at the National University of Singapore, said: "He does not allow the disability to hamper his determination to succeed and achieve his goals. Rather, he takes it in his stride and challenges himself to constantly improve."

However, not all schoolmates were as understanding, and Mr Kueh was sometimes the victim of pranks or ridicule. It was not fun being bullied, but it helped him to build a thicker skin, said Mr Kueh. Knowing how hurtful it could be

Music gave him confidence



SCAN TO WATCH



<https://str.sg/justinkueh>

SPEAKING OUT

Somewhere out there, someone is being bullied for something he or she is born with. I want to speak out about my experience, and hopefully, it will help someone.



MR JUSTIN KUEH, a third-year student at Singapore Management University, on helping others who have disabilities.

NOT LESS OF A PERSON

Having hearing loss is not a mysterious thing that makes you less of a person. It becomes a set of problems that you have to learn to overcome.



MR KUEH on facing his challenges.

GENERATION GRIT
Know of anyone aged 35 or below who has shown grit amid life's adversities? E-mail us at stnewdesk@sph.com.sg