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Living life to the fullest

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To have death hovering over one can break the resolve of even the strongest person, so you have to take your hat off to those who stay optimistic.

The room fell into a hush as everyone turned towards the door. Although the blushing bride looked thin and frail, she was radiant as she walked down the aisle.

Cancer survivor Michelle Lee, 29, was diagnosed with leukaemia at the end of 2008, a condition that dramatically changed her life. While many might break down in the face of such a life-threatening disease, Lee took it all in her stride.

“Being diagnosed with cancer doesn’t mean a death sentence,” says the design consultant.

“I was lucky to have a very positive doctor who set the precedence on how I should face the challenges ahead. He told me that cancer patients have a much higher chance of survival these days due to improved technology. He gave me hope.”



Michelle Lee (left) was a healthy 59kg before she was diagnosed with cancer.

Lee’s diagnosis came about when she started losing weight dramatically from her 59kg frame. She was initially happy about becoming thinner but when she started getting mysterious swellings and bruises, her family became concerned and insisted on a medical check-up. This led to her being immediately admitted. Lee ended up staying at the hospital for two months. She currently weighs 39kg.

The diagnosis came as a shock since there was no history of cancer in the family and Lee had always been healthy. Everyone was worried sick, but Lee’s positive attitude carried the family through the difficult times.

“I’m lucky to have a strong, supportive family. They were much more worried about me than I was. It is just not in my nature to indulge in self-pity or to ask, ‘Why me?’ Just before I got diagnosed, I wished that I could have a long holiday so I’m very careful now not to grumble or complain. Be careful of what you wish for!” says Lee with a grin.

Although she’s casual about it now, Lee had to go through seven energy-draining sessions of chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant with her sister as donor, and a mini-transplant four months later when she suffered a relapse in which she almost died.

“I had to be re-admitted when I suffered the relapse, and I thought, ‘Here we go again’. After the second transplant, I was having some complications as my body just couldn’t accept anything. Whatever I ate, I vomited. I became skinnier and skinnier because I was on drips for three weeks. My doctor said I was one lucky girl after I started showing signs of recovery — he had lost two patients that way because their body couldn’t absorb the nutrients,” she recalls.

Not being able to eat solid food for three weeks was pure torture for Lee.

“I kept dreaming of food. There was one night I thought I smelt *nasi lemak* but I knew it couldn’t be. I savoured the smell anyway.”

Chemotherapy caused Lee to lose weight, feel nauseous and lose all her hair.

“It was a tiring ordeal as chemo is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week affair lasting two weeks. I was lucky that I was plump at that time so my body could take it. After I lost weight, chemo became very draining. All I wanted to do was sleep because my entire body felt like jelly,” she reveals.



Colleagues bringing her cheer while in hospital.

Besides the tiredness, Lee’s face swelled up, her skin darkened and pain was a constant companion.

“The nurses did a very good job hiding it but I knew I must have been a sight with my face all puffed up. With my bald head, I must have looked like a big round ball!” she laughs.

“On a more serious note, the pain was excruciating. I had to take morphine to dull the pain and to help me sleep.

Sleeping was a relief, for then I would not feel the pain,” she reveals.

It was a struggle for Lee as doctors couldn’t tell how many more treatments she needed to go through.

“Unlike some other cancers where there is a scheduled set of treatments you are informed of beforehand, I didn’t know what the next treatment was. I couldn’t see the end of the long tunnel. That for me, was the hardest thing. Not knowing what was coming next.”

Lee faced further complications when her wisdom tooth emerged after the first chemotherapy session, leading to a nose infection and later a lung infection which restricted her breathing. Things got worse for her when she contracted pneumonia this year. Fortunately, Lee managed to fight off the pneumonia and her leukaemia is now under remission.

However, travel and strenuous activities have to be put on hold. Her immunity system is still weak. Drugs, needles and hospitals will now forever be a part of her life.

“Because of my relapse, my doctor is very cautious. He gets worried every time I get a fever. I felt very limited before as I was just confined to the four walls of my hospital room but I’m used to it now. I miss travelling for food as we used to search for the best places to eat,” she says.

But everything’s good now, and Lee’s only wish is to get healthier.

“I need to gain 10kg!” she quips.



The disease hasn’t got her down.

“Michelle has always been a positive person and a fighter. She is always happy, no matter what,” says Oliver Oh, Lee’s husband, with pride. “One thing I learnt from her is to never be negative. I had my moments, as the diagnosis was very hard on me. How I dealt with it privately is my own problem but in front of Michelle, I had to be strong.”

“Oliver has always been the emotional and romantic one,” says Lee fondly. “But he has been fantastic in every way, even sneaking in food for me. Hospital food is so bad!”

The couple met six years ago when they were working at Ikea.

“I was in sales and Michelle was in interior design. My pick-up line was ‘Can I borrow your ladder?’ I wanted to introduce myself but Michelle didn’t even want to shake my hand, saying her hands were dirty! But my persistence paid off when she finally agreed to have dinner with me,”

recalls Oh, 26, with a smile.

After six years of courtship, and seeing how Lee was getting better, Oh decided that it was time to take their relationship to the next level.

“I wanted to move on to the next stage of my life, and I wanted Michelle to make that journey with me,” says Oh, who surprised Lee by getting down on his knees in May this year when they were dining at a restaurant.

“It was so unexpected! I thought he wanted to go to the toilet when he knelt down because he mentioned that he

had a stomachache,” laughs Lee. “When I realised his intentions I quickly said, ‘Yes, yes, I’ll marry you. Stand up, stand up!’”

They scheduled their registration for October this year and had no plans for a reception.

“We have used up all the insurance money so everything has to come out of our own pockets now. I need to spend RM2,000 for drugs every week, which is a huge sum of money so a reception was out of the question,” explains Lee.

Then two weeks before they were to register their marriage, they received word that they had been picked as the lucky couple of Mahligai Impian, a campaign organised by the Association of Wedding Planners (AWP) and Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad (TV3) for couples in which one or both partners are seriously ill. They won a fully sponsored RM100,000 wedding, inclusive of a dinner reception, makeup and wedding outfits.

AWP president and wedding planner Leticia Hsu says Mahligai Impian came about because she has had friends in the same predicament.

“They were engaged to be married when the bride was diagnosed with cancer. But they really loved each other and married despite everything. This is what Mahligai Impian is all about — two people in love and wanting to spend their life together. Not only does Mahligai Impian give hope to the terminally ill that there is happiness despite the sadness, it also gives the lucky couple the wedding of their dreams,” says Hsu.



Hardly a blue bride.

“I’ve always dreamt of having the perfect wedding but never thought I would get it after my condition, so this is a blessing indeed. Unfortunately, we are not able to go for our honeymoon yet because I am not allowed to travel and we just can’t afford it. Maybe we’ll win a honeymoon competition!” laughs Lee.

When asked about the future and the possibility of kids, Oh says they will see how things go first. Getting Lee back to full health is the priority right now.

“I believe that everything happens for a reason,” says Lee. “I’m not sure what the reason is yet but I’m sure it will be revealed in time. I just took each day as it came and started paying more attention to living life. What’s the use of money if you can’t enjoy it because you’re in the hospital? Go do something that you’ve never thought of doing. You’ll regret it one day if you don’t.”

To those confronted with similar predicaments, Lee has this to say: “Stay focused and be positive. Don’t compare your condition to others as different bodies react and heal differently. There is always hope.”