

# UNconditional Love:

## A mother's battle to raise her son with special needs against all odds

For single mother **CHRIS THAM**, the task ahead to raise two young children single-handedly is a gargantuan one. More so, when her younger son who was born with a genetic condition - Down Syndrome - was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at aged two. To give up is never an option for this mother. Clarissa Ho explores how the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws.



**T**he bond between a mother and her child is special: a mother's love is all encompassing, all knowing and all forgiving. Every mother wants the best for her child: growing up healthy and strong, excelling in their studies, getting a place in university, having a career etc.

Some mothers however, would have to contend with life that her child would never be able to appreciate the "rites of passage" that most kids go through.

Despite the odds, a mother's love knows no limits. Chris, mother of TDS member Marcus Tham, is a mum with an indomitable spirit - not even when death tried to steal her son away - twice.

### Braving Life's Storms

◆ At the age of 50 years, Chris is an attractive-looking mother with a cheerful disposition and an infectious laughter. Her happy-go-lucky persona belies the fact that this is one woman who overcame tumultuous times to raise her children as a single parent, warded off criticism and discrimination from outsiders on her intellectually disabled son as well as taking care of his every need when he was diagnosed with diabetes.

Chris never knew her son would be born special. She had him at 27 years-old - an age group that wasn't in the high-risk group. Moreover, there were also no signs of abnormality from the ultrasound scan. Doctors, however, detected something amiss when he was born: distinct facial features and a simian line that ran across his palm. Chris' worries were not unfounded; a chromosome test when Marcus was two, confirmed he has Down Syndrome.

Raising a special needs child is never an easy task. Both mother and son had to undergo enormous pressure and were constantly under the stare of the public's eye. "Whenever we're out, people would stare and point at my

son. It was stressful initially and I am glad to have strong family support that saw me through," said Chris. "Now whenever people stare, I would go up to them and say 'Yes, my son has Down Syndrome, and if you have questions, please ask me upfront.'"

### Timely Rescues

◆ Marcus' diabetes syndromes were not overtly obvious. The only signs that the 2-year-old exhibited were: weight loss and an unusually high frequency of passing urine. He was also picky with food and only drank milk. Sensing something amiss, Chris brought Marcus to the hospital where doctors did a blood test. His blood sugar reading was so high that it was off the charts! Doctors told Chris she would have lost her son if they not sent him to the hospital within the next half an hour.

It was a close shave with death. But not his last. He had a near death encounter again when he was hospitalized at aged nine for cataracts due to diabetes.

As the eye operation was scheduled for the next morning, Marcus was not allowed food the night before. A communication breakdown at the hospital resulted in him being injected with 20 units of insulin (although he had not eaten), which caused his blood glucose to plummet to a dangerous low of 0.9 mmol/l.

By then, Marcus had slipped into a coma and his body grown limp and cold. Once again, it was Chris who came to her son's rescue. Till today, Chris still holds vivid memories of that incident, "All I could do was to pray. I prayed very hard that his blood sugar could stabilize."



### Always By His Side

◆ Chris works part-time at a canteen helper so she has more time to care for Marcus. She makes sure he eats a nutritious diet, does his blood checks regularly and also wakes up in the middle of the night to check and arrest any hypoglycemia situation he could be going through. To help cope with his medical expenses, TOUCH Diabetes Support with the help of various pharmaceutical companies also sponsors his diabetes supplies and insulin.

Although life is simple, Chris has never denied Marcus the opportunity to develop his potential. Today, Marcus is an athletic 23 year-old youth with various sports achievements. He was also part of the team who represented Singapore for the Special Olympics Games, and through sheer hardwork and determination came in fourth place in the competitive Badminton segment - beating other special needs competitors from the region.

As the interview came to a close, Marcus stepped through the door. He had just returned from work with MINDS IDEA - Employment Development Centre - which provides employment for adults with intellectual challenges. Chris beamed with pride as she introduced Marcus to this reporter. The close bond between mother and son were evident. Though initially shy, Marcus was cooperative and at the gentle prodding of Chris, even posed for a photograph for this magazine - nicely decked in a crisp new shirt bought by his sister. ♥

*This reporter was touched by the strong power of love which unites every member in this family. Indeed the love of a family is life's greatest blessing!*



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