

Poly Student Wins Award For Special Achievement Despite Visual Impairment

When Miss Sophie Soon was two years old, her parents realised that something was not right. Their toddler did not respond to her surroundings until she was very close to the objects.

When she turned five, Sophie was diagnosed with cone rod dystrophy, a progressive loss of one's vision. While the extent of the visual impairment differs, there are many patients who become legally blind as the disease progresses.

Now, Miss Soon, 19, relies largely on her peripheral vision to make out her surroundings.

"My vision has been deteriorating and will continue to deteriorate," she said.

For now, she is still able to get by her daily activities like a person with normal vision.

And despite the odds, the Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) student is both a violinist and swimmer. These achievements and her positive attitude have won Miss Soon the Platinum Award for Special Achievement at NYP's Student Talent & Achievement Recognition (Star) Awards.

Said Miss Soon: "For swimming, my visual impairment doesn't affect me that much. But I learn violin differently from others because I can't read the score sheet properly."

Miss Soon's violin teacher plays a segment of a song before she imitates it. After repeating this process for the different segments of a song, Miss Soon would eventually piece the song together. She practices the violin daily for up to two hours.

On top of that, she swims up to six days a week alongside managing her studies at NYP, where she is pursuing a Diploma in Business Management.

She said: "It requires good time management and proper prioritising. People always think it deprives me of time to study, but that's not true. When there's that little time, we use it more efficiently and fruitfully. It pushes me beyond my limits."

Last year, Miss Soon won a total of three gold medals in two para-athletic swimming events. She also represented Singapore in the Asean Para Games (APG) last year, but did not win any medals.

"I went in with no expectations and that was really the best result that I could have asked for," she said. "It was then that my drive to excel in swimming really grew. I knew that if I can do it once, I can do it over and over again as long as I work hard."

PASSION

Since the age of three, Miss Soon had a passion for playing the violin. It stemmed from her musical family background - her mother plays the piano, while her father plays Chinese instruments.

"It was always Symphony 92.4 FM playing classical music in the car," she said.

Miss Soon, now a Grade 7 violinist, performs at school events as part of the Strings Quartet in NYP. She was also part of a quartet that performed to raise funds on campus for the survivors of the Nepal earthquake last year.

In 2014, she performed at the President's 2014 Star Charity Show alongside local band The Sam Willows. Her initial worry that classical and pop music would not go well together was unfounded when the performance turned out better than expected.

Miss Soon said: "I was very happy with the performance and it was nice bonding with The Sam Willows."

The Sam Willows thought she was inspiring too.

A spokesman for the band said: "She never makes a single complaint about her predicament. Never once uses it as an excuse, never once considers herself handicapped. And she isn't. She's brilliant in her own right."

Miss Soon's mother drives her to the pool for her swimming practices and occasionally for her violin lessons, which take place once a week.

She said: "My mother is very supportive. She doesn't tell me which path to take, but she ensures the path I decide to take is a good one. My father works most of the time, but he's also very supportive and he's there for me whenever he can."

Miss Soon added: "Of course I'm exhausted, but I'll not give this up. Not any time soon. This is something I really enjoy."



Sophie Soon (right) won the Platinum Award for Special Achievement at Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP)'s Student Talent & Achievement Recognition (Star) Awards
PHOTO: The New Paper

By **HO YUEN TENG**
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ABOUT NYP'S STAR AWARDS

Nanyang Polytechnic's Student Talent & Achievement Recognition (Star) Awards is an annual event that recognises students with special talents and passion in non-academic areas. Initiated in 2013, the awards celebrate achievements in areas such as the arts, sports and adventure, and community service that make campus life more lively and interesting. This year, the polytechnic gave out 1,388 awards to both individuals and groups. Forty recipients received the highest Platinum award.