

Visually-impaired students defy odds to do well in O Levels

Lorna O'Hara speaks to St Anthony's Aashwini Gunasilan and SJI's Ian Luke Chan

"Having my eyesight gone was as if my life had literally ended, and that there was nothing that I could do," said 17-year-old Aashwini Gunasilan from St Anthony's Canossian Secondary School.

Despite this handicap, she scored seven distinctions in the GCE O Level exams.

In December 2012, Gunasilan's world turned upside down when she was diagnosed with Vogt-Koyanagi-Harada (VKH) disease, a rare auto-immune condition which resulted in her losing her central vision.

It was as though she was seeing "through a thick jelly", she said.

"It was devastating. I cried a lot. It was like being able to see and then waking up and not seeing at all."

In three months, Gunasilan's condition became chronic and she decided to skip her 2013 GCE O Levels.

Gunasilan, a parishioner of the Church of Christ the King, said her faith took a beating.

"I lost my faith. I asked myself why did it happen to me, and I questioned God, like where is God? I stopped going to church. I used to go to Novena every Saturday and then I stopped. I didn't go for Sunday Masses and I didn't pray at home," she said.

Whenever Gunasilan's mother asked her why she was not going to church, "the excuse I gave was like I can't see, so why do I have to go to the church? I can't see the missal, I can't see what's on the screen, so why bother?"

To help her get back on her feet in 2013, her family, teachers and classmates rallied together to give her much needed support that year.

Family members gave Gunasilan "two-hour talks" everyday, and during the first two weeks when she was absent from school, her classmates "recorded whatever happened in class".

After school, they would take turns to read from the textbook

During the weeks that Gunasilan was absent from school, her classmates recorded whatever happened in class for her. After school, they would take turns to read from the textbook and record it also.

and record it. "Then, they would come to my house over the weekends and pass it to me," she recalled. Eight friends also visited her daily.

"When I came back to school, my friends made me feel normal ... I think that's really important as you don't want people to start looking at you and treating you differently," she said.

Her role as president of the school's Catholic Activities Council (CAC) also helped her realise that she "missed going to church".



Aashwini Gunasilan (centre) seen here with her mother Usha Glora Das and sister Pavethra Gunasilan. Aashwini suffers from a condition which resulted in her losing her central vision.

Soon, she began to attend Novena services and Sunday Mass again.

Her school counsellor also got in touch with a social worker from the Singapore National Eye Centre over Gunasilan's condition.

She was then directed to iC2 PrepHouse, a facility which assists and support children with

low vision, and which helps them stay in mainstream schools, said Ms Jannine De Cotta, Gunasilan's form teacher in 2013.

During the sessions at iC2 PrepHouse, Gunasilan learnt how to use a CCTV magnifier, which allows her to read texts by adjusting font sizes, colour contrast and text

colour. She also took up braille lessons.

During the O Level exams, she used the magnifier and relied on audio devices to complete her papers.

"I wasn't expecting results like these," beamed the teenager, who shared that she has "been wanting to pursue law since 14". □

Support of classmates, teachers helped blind student score



SJI's Ian Luke Chan lost his vision last year. Nevertheless, he managed to score five distinctions.

Despite losing his vision completely last year, St Joseph's Institution student Ian Luke Chan managed to score distinctions in English, Combined Humanities, Physics, and Elementary and Additional Maths.

He had a B3 for Chemistry. Chan had been having vision problems since young, having lost sight in one eye due to glaucoma.

"My right eye has been blind since I was eight, so I have practically been with one eye," said Chan.

When he was 15, he started "freaking out" when he saw "white spots" developing in his other eye.

After getting the eye checked, doctors concluded that glaucoma had also affected his left eye.

Chan took a break from school in 2013, and when he returned in 2014, he could no longer see.

Chan, who is a parishioner at the Church of the Holy Spirit,

shared that his faith was affected for "a little while".

"I was first angry for a while because I did not understand why I was going blind," he said. "But after the anger went away, I guess I just accepted [it]."

His classmates and teachers were supportive when he returned to school.

"If the teacher wrote things on the board ... my classmates sitting near me would tell me what's on the board," he said. And when he needed to "walk around the school" or "go to the canteen, they would guide me", he added.

"If the teacher wrote things on the board ... my classmates sitting near me would tell me what's on the board."

— Ian Luke Chan

"My teachers were patient with me and they coached me through things that I really did not understand."

When the O Levels drew near, Chan also "stayed back a little later" in school and "prayed more often".

For his Maths and Science O Level papers, he had to vocalise his answers and a scribe would write it down, while for his humanities and English papers, he relied on a computer to type his answers.

When asked if he lost his patience at any time while studying for the O Levels, he said "never".

Chan, who has an aggregate score of 11 points for six subjects, said he will apply to study in Catholic Junior College.

He also hopes to study Psychology in university. □

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