

'Everyone is equal in the pool': Visually impaired siblings overcome odds to earn success for Singapore

by Matthew Mohan 19 Dec 2021

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/colin-sophie-soon-siblings-disabled-swimming-para-games-2378506>



Sophie Soon (top) and Colin Soon (bottom) in action for Singapore (Photos: Sport Singapore, SNPC)

SINGAPORE: He may have won four gold medals for Singapore at the recent Asian Youth Para Games in Bahrain, but Colin Soon's first plunge into the pool was purely accidental.

Then three years old and dangling from the side of a pool, he joked with his older sister Sophie that he was about to fall in.

"I kept telling her: 'Hey, I'm gonna fall in, I'm going to fall in.' And she was like: 'You better not fall in,'" the 16-year-old said.

"And then I lost my balance. I fell into the pool and I just got back up again."

Grinning wide, Colin – who his mother Madam Lee Lay Hong describes as a "magnet" for the water – had discovered a new world.

A stark contrast to Colin, Sophie's early encounters in the pool were far from joyous. The 24-year-old recalls one particularly humiliating incident when she was nine.

Her former swimming coach told her to stand in front of her class and shake hands with another student. He said: "You two would be good friends because you both are so slow."

"That was very demoralising and that really made me hate swimming ... It was so traumatising, and eventually I quit because I didn't like the dynamic," said Sophie.



Sophie and Colin Soon during a training session in 2015 (Photo: Lee Lay Hong)

Despite their contrasting early experiences, the siblings are both national swimmers today.

While Colin was the leading light for Singapore at the Asian Youth Para Games, several months earlier, Sophie competed at the Paralympics where she featured in two events, most notably finishing fourth in the women's SB12 100m breaststroke.

The secret to their success? Hard work, sheer perseverance and the unwavering support of their parents, they told CNA.

"I WAS TOTALLY AT A LOSS"

It was when Sophie was in pre-school that Mdm Lee noticed something was amiss.

"They started doing exercises like writing numbers, recognition of numbers and all that. She (Sophie) took a long time and she kept getting it wrong, and she had her whole face practically buried in the paper," she recalled.

"I thought something was definitely not right."

Initially suspecting myopia, Mdm Lee took Sophie to an optician.

"She put on the glasses and she said it didn't help at all. Then I decided that maybe it's a little bit more than just myopia," she said.

"So my husband got an appointment for us to go to an ophthalmologist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and that was when we discovered her eye condition."

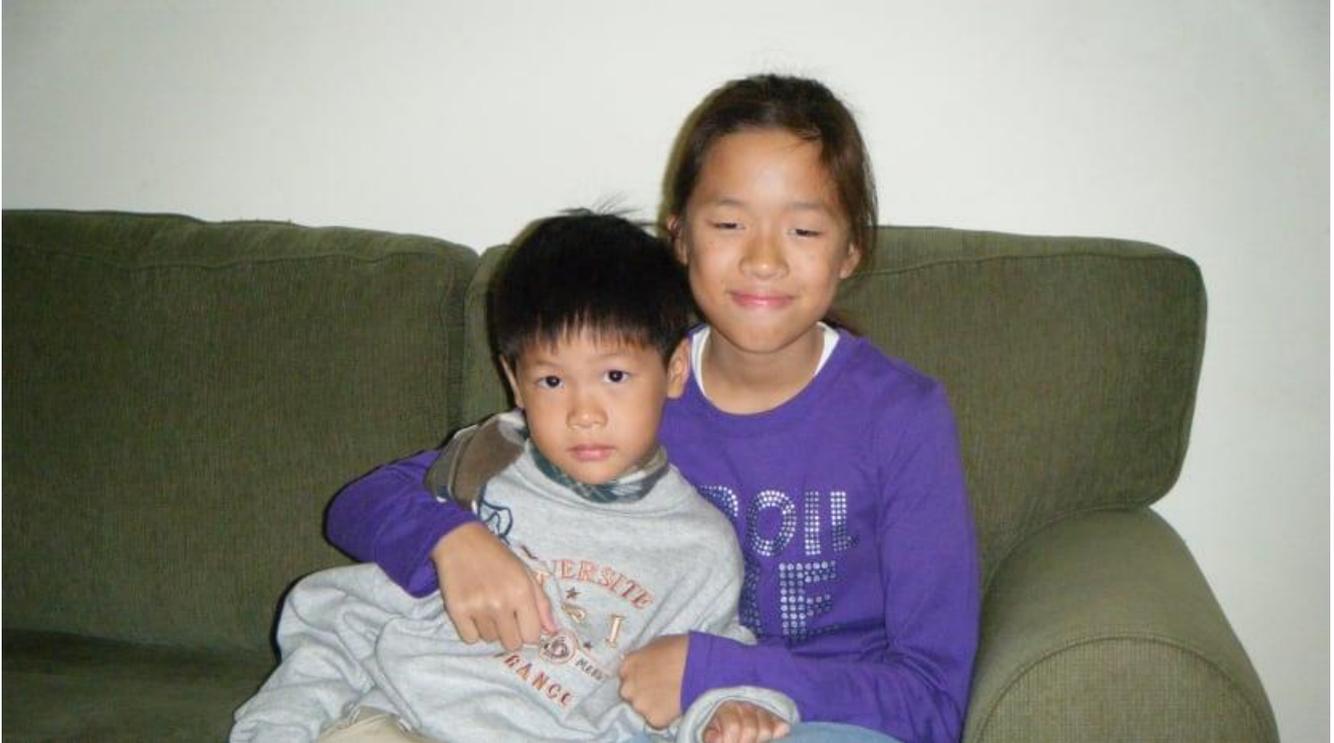
Sophie was diagnosed with cone rod dystrophy, a condition that leads to the loss of cone cells in the retina responsible for central and colour vision. This means she is unable to see objects directly in front of her and needs to use her peripheral vision to do so. She is also not able to see much colour.

The condition is a progressive one, and Sophie's vision has deteriorated over time.

“I must admit it was a bit scary at first because we have no experience with eye conditions like this. And my biggest concern then was how is she going to be educated? Because I did not know any visually impaired person – adult or child – and I was totally at a loss,” recalled Mdm Lee.

“I didn’t know of any other parents at that time ... I felt so alone.”

So began months of searching and asking questions.



Sophie and Colin Soon in 2010 (Photo: Lee Lay Hong)

Mdm Lee sent emails to organisations around the world, seeking advice on how she could help her daughter.

“By some providence ... this lady from Australia wrote back to me and she was really, really nice. She invited us to go to Melbourne (so) she could assess my daughter and also advise me what I can do for her,” recalled Mdm Lee.

“Once I met with them and got Sophie properly assessed, I realised that there's actually a lot that we can do for her – it's not that nothing can be done.”

"TOUGH BATTLE"

It was after Sophie’s assessment in Melbourne that her parents concluded their daughter would be able to cope in a mainstream school rather than a special education one.

Her mother approached a primary school and asked the principal to give Sophie a chance.

Sophie loved attending school, Mdm Lee said. “She blossomed from there and I realised that a special (education) school is not really needed if there are no other cognitive issues with a child.”

However, it was a “tough battle”, said Mdm Lee.

“Some of the teachers were not so accommodating and sort of put her to the side, sometimes (there were) nasty remarks about her ... She wasn't allowed to use assistive devices for exams. There was a fight with the exam board.”

But Sophie can advocate for herself now, Mdm Lee said.

“I think it's because she saw in me that very fierce 'tiger mum', pushing for her rights, so she is doing the same thing for herself.

“It laid the groundwork for future students with visual impairment. I am very confident I can help them and I can negotiate with the schools for them. So I think that was a good fight, worth fighting.”

And their experiences with Sophie meant that things weren't as “frightening” when Colin was diagnosed.

In fact, Mdm Lee and her husband actively looked out for signs of possible vision impairment when Colin was a toddler.

“So I'd walk (with him) to kindergarten every morning and I'll stop at a distance and I say: ‘Oh, what is that sign? What does it say?’ And then when he couldn't read it, I said: ‘Okay, can you just say the letters for me or read the numbers of the car plate?’ And I also noticed that he had to go quite close before he could see it,” she recalled.

“I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to speak to the teachers, I had to spend a little bit more time with him and all that. So it wasn't as frightening with Colin as it was for Sophie.”

Mdm Lee went on to attain a master's degree in special education, specialising in visual impairment, in Sydney. She co-founded iC2 PrepHouse, an organisation that helps cater to the needs of children with low vision.

A former teacher at mainstream secondary schools, she is now a vision teacher at iC2 PrepHouse.

Children with visual impairment are referred by doctors or schools to iC2 PrepHouse, which then assesses the child and discusses with parents about programmes that could benefit them.



The Soon family in 2016 (Photo: Lee Lay Hong)

EVERYBODY EQUAL IN THE POOL

After Sophie quit her swimming group, Mdm Lee found a new coach who patiently taught the youngster and worked on improving her technique.

Coach Danny Ong also found ways to make the sport enjoyable for her.

“I was just so demotivated ... At the back of my mind, I remember being called slow and not being good enough and being weaker than everybody else,” said Sophie.

“He really managed to help me disassociate from those feelings and have a newfound love for the sport.”

“He would take those toys that can sink to the bottom of the pool and would place them around the pool ... He made the sport fun. It wasn't just swimming laps anymore,” she recalled.

Sophie eventually made the national team and competed at international level competitions such as the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships.



Sophie competing at this year's Tokyo Paralympics. (Photo: Sport Singapore)

“As a person with a disability on land, no matter what I do, people can tell that I'm disabled. But when I'm in the pool, I'm just swimming and no one can tell ... I feel the same as everybody else.

“It's very liberating that (people of) all abilities are equal in the pool in that sense, because no one is judged for their disability or whatever. Everybody is treated equally.”

While Sophie could get around without a mobility aid when she was younger, her sight began deteriorating in 2017 and she now relies primarily on her guide dog Orinda when getting around.

But the public's understanding of disabilities such as hers is still not where it should be, she noted.

She has had people threatening to call security when she enters malls with Orinda. “I've gotten to the point where I'm very used to it but I think this is not something that should be a norm,” Sophie said.

CHARTING THEIR OWN JOURNEY

Swimming competitively has had a big influence on Sophie and Colin, said their mother.

“Sophie used to be kind of scatterbrained, not very organised, not very motivated to do a lot of things. But when she started, especially competitive swimming, I realised a very big change in her,” Mdm Lee said.

“She was motivated not just to swim and train, she was also very motivated in her schoolwork. She did well in the exams. Her time management became so good, to the point that I didn't have to nag at her to do her homework. She would just do it.”

Colin, who is the quieter one of the two, has learned to open up more to people, said Mdm Lee.

“He is actually quite introverted, he doesn't like to talk and I keep telling him that there will come a time where you have to handle interviews and all that on your own,” she said.

Being able to compete in the same sport as his sister has helped. It's like having a companion – “there's someone else doing it with me”, Colin said.

“Her presence sort of kept me going,” he said. “It was really exciting to see her on such a high stage. It was really inspiring and also exciting.”

“I also want to go to the Paralympics one day. I'm hoping and aiming to go to Paris in 2024.”



Colin won four golds for Singapore at the Asian Youth Para Games (Photo: SNPC)

Sophie is also “incredibly proud” of her brother’s achievements.

“I know the amount of toughness it takes to achieve that kind of level of success ... Even if I weren't into swimming, I would definitely still be proud of him. But the fact that I'm in it with him, it makes it even more exciting,” she said.

To her kids, Mdm Lee is a supporter, a fighter, but most importantly, a mother.

“They have come a very long way. I could always push them to do a lot of things, but if they don't want to do it, there's nothing I can do. So a lot of it actually comes from them,” she said.

She never thought her children would one day be representing the country.

“For both of them, we never thought they would come so far. I always thought that it is good (if) they can swim and that's about it.”

Her wish for Colin and Sophie is simple, that they continue to forge their own path.

“I've always told my kids that they have to live their own lives. There's no point (in) me telling them what they should be doing ... They will chart their own journey.”