

## 'I love you, mom'

**MP Denise Phua tells WONG SHER MAINE why those four words from her son meant so much to her**

**Some of the** sweetest words a woman can hear in her lifetime is when her child whispers in her ear, "I love you, mom".

MP for Jalan Besar GRC Denise Phua, 49, was once doubtful she would ever hear those from her son, Jun-Yi.

For at a time when most toddlers are happily chatting away, her son was silent, detached, lost in a world of his own. He did not speak, he shunned other children, he would not look his mother in the eye.

He was confirmed autistic in May 1999, when he was three.

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects one's ability to communicate, form relationships and respond appropriately to the environment. The condition is lifelong.

"I wept," said Ms Phua. "It was not a surprise. It was a painful confirmation."

From then on, her life, transformed by autism, changed completely: From corporate bigwig, she became a full-

time volunteer. She is now heading the charity, Autism Resource Centre, where she works for free every day from 7.45am till the evening. She can also be said to be the unofficial Parliament spokesman for the Singapore autistic and special needs community.

What brought about the shift was her determination to tackle life's problems head on.

"The first lesson I learnt in parenting a special needs child is the simplest and the most difficult," said Ms Phua, who has a daughter, Yi-Xin, two years older than Jun-Yi.

"It is the need to proactively decide to get over the grief, size up the situation and get down to action. Complaining, blaming and whining will not make a difference. It is how I respond to challenges in my life."

In the early days, she found out all she could about autism, even going overseas to learn about the various treatments.

In the process, she met many professionals and families helping other special needs children and adults.

"It was because of Jun-Yi that I learnt about and experienced the challenges faced by the non-profit charity sector. I wouldn't have been able to empathise so deeply with the plight of those who seem to be always on the fringe of mainstream Singapore."

Ms Phua firmly believes that it is important to focus on what people can do, and not on what they cannot do.

"Take Jun-Yi, for instance. Although he is not expressive, he is very able in daily problem solving, drawing, and in using the computer and other electronic appliances."

She wants as many special needs children as possible to be able, contributing members of society. To that end, in what is arguably her most significant contribution to the community to date, she co-founded the Pathlight School, Singapore's first autism school, which teaches its students academic subjects as well as life skills.

She had even considered selling her house to fund the school when it started shakily, but today the popular special school has a long waiting list.

As for Jun Yi, he is now a 13-year-old who passed his PSLE last year well enough to go on to the Normal Technical stream; whose signature animal drawings were thought good enough by a property developer to display in a resort; and, most importantly, who can hold a conversation when he is not rushed into it.

And yes, he has said the important four words to mummy, several years ago.

"I was bidding him good night one evening and whispered into his ear, 'I love you, Jun'. He responded sleepily, 'I love you, mom!'"



Ms Phua and Jun-Yi, who starts secondary school this year, veg out.