

Public speaking company hires only people with disabilities



Glow in the Dark founder Jared Sia (left) and para-athlete Steve Tee at the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped on Feb 21, 2018. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

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SINGAPORE - For 22 years, Mr Steve Tee had no problems seeing clearly.

But that changed in 2004 when he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a rare disease that begins with a partial loss of vision and eventually leads to total or near-total blindness.

"It started with night blindness," the 36-year-old told The Straits Times. "As time passed, my visual field slowly narrowed to a tunnel."

By age 23, Mr Tee could no longer indulge in his favourite sports: Track and field, football and cycling.

But an epiphany soon after his diagnosis got him out of his funk.

"While walking in the rain, I realised that if you're hungry, you will find ways to get food. Likewise, if you're faced with a problem, you should find a way to overcome it," he said.

His never-say-die attitude led him to pursue a distance learning course and by end-2008, he obtained a double major degree in computer security and networking and eight months later, landed his first job as a call centre supervisor.

Last March, he joined the national para cycling team as a tandem cyclist and won a bronze medal in the men's 24.6km Individual Time Trial event at the Asean Para Games in September the same year.

Today, he uses his adversity to inspire and motivate others.

His story shines bright with those of five others under the banner of Glow in the Dark, a social enterprise that offers workshops and motivational talks, conducted wholly by people with disabilities (PWDs), to schools and companies.

Started in 2015 by three Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students - two of whom have since left - it aims to help people who are visually disabled carve out a career in public speaking.

The company has since held more than 30 workshops that were attended by 3,200 people.

This year, Glow in the Dark hired its first non-visually disabled trainer, Mr Sim Kang Wei, in a bid to include other PWDs. The 28-year-old suffers from cerebral palsy, which impairs muscle control.

The enterprise now has six active trainers who are readily available to run a workshop.

Many PWDs have a flair for public speaking, said co-founder Jared Sia, 27.

"They have been through so much adversity. This shows in their stories, when they share about how life is like being blind or having other disabilities," he added.

Mr Sia, who works full time as a commodity analyst at a bank, believes PWDs lack opportunities, not talent. A National Council of Social Service report in 2016 says PWDs form only 0.1 per cent of the private sector workforce.

But it was the suicide of an autistic friend four years ago that prompted him to start the company.

"He faced continual bullying at work and on social media. I was one of his few friends and felt I could have done more," he said.

It began as a project between Mr Sia and two of his NTU friends, and the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH). The aim was to create a social enterprise that employs mainly people who are visually disabled.

The three-man team put out a total of \$5,000 of their own money to hire trainers from SAVH and pay for other expenses.

In March 2015, Glow in the Dark held its first workshop.

Ten months later, it received \$25,000 in start-up funds from consulting firm Accenture before its official launch in January 2016.

The company, which is not part of SAVH, stays in the black by charging for its workshops and talks. It has a website and Facebook page where clients can directly engage its services.

Each workshop is run by three to four trainers, with newer additions taking on small roles, like demonstrating how to lead a blind person from point A to B, before they move on to play a lead role by giving talks.

The company spends about \$1,000 on each trainer to hone their public speaking skills before their first workshop.

The onus of keeping Glow in the Dark running falls on Mr Sia's shoulders, although a team of eight carries out operations such as marketing and recruitment.

He credits his trainers for motivating him to spend his weekends on the social enterprise. "Most of them have more vision and sense of purpose than many able-bodied people," he said.

Mr Sia singled out Mr Sim who, with his stilted gait and need for crutches, was an easy target for bullies when he was young. Having his uniform soiled and being beaten were a regular part of his growing-up years.

Mr Sim joined Glow in the Dark last month to "use that pain to connect with youths and adults". An advocate of disability education awareness in schools, he acknowledges Singapore has made huge strides in opening people's eyes especially to children with special needs.

"About 20 years ago, disability awareness was very low. We had to find our own way to survive. Now, there is more support for us," he said.

But there is still way to go.

Only five in 10 parents polled, in a 2016 survey commissioned by Lien Foundation, were comfortable with a special needs child sitting next to their own.

"Inclusion does not equal integration," Mr Sim said.

Mr Sia said people gravitate towards those who are like them and he believes that increased interaction with PWDs is the key to resolving the issue.

It has led Glow in the Dark to set itself the long-term goal of holding talks and workshops at every Singapore school.

"Hiring PWDs or including them in schools is just the first step... It really boils down to the heart and the values of every person in the workplace and school. We have a long way to go but I'm optimistic," said Mr Sia.

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