

## Roland Tay - A Dad with a Mission



*Dads for Life interviews Roland Tay, father of 2, on how journeying with his autistic son has been the inspiration for a life well lived.*

### **A Blessing in Disguise**

When Roland Tay and his wife, Denise discovered in 1998 that their younger child, Tay Jun-Yi, was diagnosed with autism, he never thought that this would bring his marriage and the entire family closer together.

Jun-Yi, 17, is currently doing his Secondary 4 Normal Technical studies at Pathlight School.

They take care to do things together with Jun-Yi and constantly challenge themselves to help him and others like him. As a family, they go on local and overseas outings, have meals together at home, and read to him at night. These, together with their belief in a higher purpose in life, have gone a long way towards strengthening their marriage and family.



Roland and Jun-Yi having a joyous time out at the sea at the Maldives (June 2012).

In fact, Roland is grateful that the whole family, including Jun-Yi's older sister Tay Yi-Xin, 18, and Delia, their helper who has been with them for 20 years, pull their weight to ensure Jun-Yi's potential is maximised. Yi-Xin helps her brother with his schoolwork while Delia coaches him to build his daily life skills.

Jun-Yi and his sister are extremely close. Knowing that there is someone to care for Jun-Yi has been a source of comfort for both parents. Roland explains that both he and his wife used to constantly remind young Yi-Xin to look out for her brother, while taking care not to be over-protective of him at her expense. The fruits of their parenting approach have yielded much, for Yi-Xin has turned out to be, in Roland's words, the best "Jie Jie" for her brother. She finds her brother adorable and teachable even though he doesn't express himself much.

### **Rewarding Moments**

Given the communication, social interaction and rigidity challenges faced by persons with autism, Roland was greatly delighted when Jun-Yi's verbal communication skills and work habits improved throughout his years at Pathlight. In addition, the family also attended many training sessions conducted by both local and foreign autism experts so they could be better teachers to Jun-Yi at home. Today, they feel that their efforts have paid off as Jun-Yi is much better at asking questions and verbalising his needs. He is also disciplined in his daily routines like completing his school work and daily runs on the treadmill.

Roland also shares, with a twinkle in his eyes, that there is never a dull moment with his son. He recounts the first time his boy used words like 'pretty' and 'adorable' to compliment a girl – words the family had not heard him utter before! Moments of embarrassment in public have also become

sources of hilarious and fond memories to be remembered and shared - with a dose of good-natured humour.

In the course of journeying with Jun-Yi, Roland was introduced to the very extensive needs of the social welfare sector. As a result, he decided to apply his years of business experience in the corporate world towards doing something meaningful for the special needs community. After having gathered some experience volunteering with the Autism Resource Centre (ARC) and helping his wife, Denise, with the setting up of Pathlight School; he finally quit the corporate world at the end of 2008 to start up the Professor Brawn Café, a social enterprise that aims to help people with special needs gain financial independence and self-confidence through gainful employment.

## A Dad's Dream for His Son

One of Roland's main goals is to empower and equip his son towards independence and to be able to lead a quality and dignified life - especially after he and his wife have passed on. It is also his desire to see Jun-Yi live out his creative passion as a talented artist who loves to draw animals. He dreams that one day Jun-Yi's creative gifts can be tapped on, not just as a source of income but also as a blessing to the community. Towards this end, Roland has been encouraging his son to develop his artistic skills and to expand on his repertoire.



Roland assisting Jun-Yi with studying the map of the London Zoo (June 2013).

## Relating to Other Dads

Roland's advice to dads who find themselves in similar situations is to not lose hope and to remember that they have a choice, whether to remain in hopelessness or to turn their grief and fear into something positive and exciting. They need to learn to tell themselves that their special needs child is no accident, and it may well turn out to be the best thing that has ever happened to them.

Reflecting from his own experience, Roland realises that though the early years with Jun-Yi were difficult and sometimes painful, his son has taught him many things. Lessons about love, patience, and graciousness; that he would have never otherwise learnt.

Most of all, Roland has learnt from his son what it means to experience heart-felt joy in the simplicity of every day relationships and life.

**About the Author:** The Dads for Life Resource Team comprises local content writers and experts, including psychologists, counsellors, educators and social service professionals, dedicated to developing useful resources for dads.

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