

A splash of colour

World Autism Day 2011 Singapore

By Tay Yu Ling

A celebration of hope

World Autism Day (WAD) 2011 Singapore kicked off to a rousing start on the morning of 2 April at Rainbow Centre Yishun Park School (RCYPS) with an exuberant cheerleading performance by the school's students. In their red and gold costumes, they jumped and danced on stage with their glittery pom-poms to welcome Guest of Honour and Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan into the school's auditorium, which was packed with more than 300 parents and guests.

An energetic dance by students of the St Andrew's Autism Centre (SAAC) Dance Club conveyed the strength of life and vibrancy of hope in children with autism while "The Frog Dance" by RCYPS students aged five and six showcased their self-confidence and coordination. The final performance was a soulful duet by Caleb Lai, aged seven, a former RCYPS student who now attends a mainstream primary school and Ms Faridah Ali, a trainer and consultant with Rainbow Centre. With their powerful vocals they sang, "We're All the Same", a song about friendship, love and hope.

Participants at the WAD were treated to a morning of meaningful activities which included performances, workshops, a panel discussion, and an art exhibition. The games carnival was specially prepared for the children, and the event was organised with the aim of increasing

public awareness, showcasing talents, and providing a platform for concerns to be raised. Also inherent in the event was the hope of fostering collaboration amongst the various autism organisations, as well as friendship amongst participants.

"A continuum of CARE: Celebrating Autism, Reaching Excellence"

The theme for WAD 2011 was an appropriate one, highlighting the spectrum of support and services that needs to be in place so that individuals with autism can achieve their highest potential. Indeed, Singapore has come some way since the first autism-specific programme for children aged 2 to 12 was introduced in 1989 by Margaret Drive Special School, now known as Rainbow Centre Margaret Drive School. In the past five years, Singapore has seen an increase in the availability of services and support offered. These include early diagnosis and intervention by hospitals, autism-focused education by schools, and monetary support from the government for children with autism.

Four distinguished speakers were present at the event to share their knowledge and experience. In separate workshops, they addressed some of the issues and concerns that parents raised. Dr Sung Min, a consultant from the Institute of Mental Health discussed the relevance of medical management in children with autism



Our young performers eagerly awaiting the start of their item



The guest speakers sharing their expertise and advice with parents



spectrum disorders (ASD); Dr S. Mariam Aljunied from the Ministry of Education addressed the question of how to ascertain if a child with autism could cope with mainstream education; Dr Kenneth Poon from the National Institute of Education spoke on preparing children with ASD for adulthood and lastly, Mdm Choo Kah Ying, a parent and writer touched on the importance of positive caregiver attitudes, and shared some useful strategies in behavioural management.

While the parents attended the workshops, the children had their own share of fun at the carnival grounds that included a bouncy castle, a roller-blading rink, a bubbles stall and a *batik* painting station. About 15 volunteers from Duke-NUS ran after the children they had been paired with, as they threw hoops, knocked cans over with beanbags, and fished for prizes. By the end of the morning, the children were as elated as the volunteers were exhausted, albeit in a good way.

A stroll through the art exhibition left visitors impressed with the creativity and artistry of the children. Not surprisingly, some of the art pieces were presented as tokens of appreciation to the Guest of Honour, sponsors and speakers. The programme concluded with a panel discussion comprising the four speakers and Executive Director of Rainbow Centre, Mrs June Tham. Through this discussion, parents had the chance to ask questions and share their concerns.



Dr Vivian Balakrishnan receives an artwork made by the students



The committee and volunteers from Duke-NUS

So many questions, so much to do

In his speech, Dr Balakrishnan left the aspiring clinicians and scientists with three questions. Why the increasing number of new ASD cases? Why the manifestation of such a wide spectrum of presentation? And what treatments work best? This could well be a clarion call for the medical profession to continue to support and reach out to the community by way of research and innovation.

WAD 2011 is a collaboration between Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and Rainbow Centre, with the support of SAAC and the Autism Resource Centre, to raise public awareness of autism, amongst other aims. It is the first collaboration of its kind which saw various key organisations and medical students coming together in support of the autism cause. That morning, Singapore also joined its counterparts from countries all over the world to commemorate World Autism Awareness Day, a day designated by the United Nations to raise awareness and support for the community. The event is listed in the United Nations website <http://www.worldautismawarenessday.org>. The organisers would like to extend their appreciation to SingHealth, the various donors, as well as all participants for making this event a successful one. **SMA**



Tay Yu Ling (Class of 2014) is one of the organisers of the WAD and a first-year Ngee Ann Kongsi scholar at Duke-NUS. She is also Singapore's first bronze medalist and best performer to date at the Commonwealth Games in fencing (Individual Women's). Before coming to medical school, she studied Biological Sciences at Nanyang Technological University. She loves the arts, travelling and reading.