

## Reflections on World Autism Day

By Josh Chua

“All of us different... yet we're all the same...” As the last line of the song approached a *ritardando*, almost sounding like an intentional emphasis, Ms Faridah Ali and little Caleb Lai's soulful rendition of “We're All the Same” saw enthusiastic applause radiate across the sea of moist-eyed faces. While the symbolism of the caregiver holding hands with and guiding Caleb, an autistic child, was not lost on the audience, the significance of World Autism Day, or the commemoration of the autism cause has a deeper meaning that may not be immediately apparent; it was also about celebrating unsung heroes: the parents.

Benjamin Sheares College embarked on this community service project after learning that such an event has never been celebrated at a national level. However, the compelling force behind our efforts was the sympathy we felt for the parents who were willing to talk about their struggles, especially from the aunt of Giselle, a Duke-NUS student. Facing a group of eager young medical students, her painfully candid sharing about the difficulties in raising and fears for her child's future struck a chord within our hearts. This, coupled with the many stories such as the anguished plea from a father who needed to raise \$2 million by his retirement to ensure that his son would be taken care of after his passing, served to help us direct this year's focus on efforts to help children suffering from ASD transit into adulthood.

Dr Balakrishnan had announced in his speech that we are here not so much to celebrate autism itself, but rather, the hope that parents and caregivers invest so selflessly in their children. That was indeed what we saw in the opening performances. It was evident that these children faced difficulties that their peers did not: in motor coordination, following directions, keeping time and focusing on stage. Though the ensuing smorgasbord of movements might have come across as disorderly to an uneducated audience, the overwhelming pride and joy of loving parents was made unambiguous with each escalation of rambunctious cheering from the audience.

Our volunteers and guests had the privilege of interacting with the children at the morning carnival. While the children had a variety of activities to expend their limitless energy on, our volunteers got to experience and appreciate firsthand the amount of endurance needed to work with children with ASD. One of the most heart-warming moments was when one of the children stood on a bouncy castle but did not know how to bounce. His elder brother, who could not be more than six years old, took his hand and said, “Come, like this,” as he demonstrated the movements using motor coordination that we take for granted. The love from a supportive family member is a beautiful thing.

The event was capped with a panel discussion. It was during this portion that we got a glimpse of the psyche and emotional status of the parents. The passion and fervour evident during these discussions served to highlight the very hope Dr Balakrishnan described in the beginning. Despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles of our competitive education system, parents are willing to sacrifice time, careers and dreams in exchange of securing a fighting chance for their child. Towards the end, a lady with a minor speaking disability stood up and introduced herself as a researcher and someone with ASD. She wanted to rally other successful adults with ASD to help inspire these children and families. The dedication and sense of belonging in this community is incredibly resolute and has blown me away.

Being part of WAD as an organiser and a participant has given me a deeper understanding of the multifactorial inputs in this disorder. While interaction with the children served to reinforce many of the symptoms and inadequate treatments that were learnt miles away at school, what was novel and impactful was the understanding of the profound effects of ASD on the entire family. We now see the importance of paying more attention to the plight of families – be it in clinical practice, research or in the policy-making arena. Furthermore, we need to be aware of the complex needs of families and be able to provide information on medical social workers and service providers who can aid them in navigating through applications for public support.

As Caleb walked off the stage amidst thunderous applause, he walked towards the Guest of Honour and stuck out his hand. Dr Balakrishnan stood up and stooped over to shake his hand, while Caleb's parents, sitting a few rows back, beamed with pride.

In celebrating World Autism Day, we also celebrate the hope of children with ASD and their families. **SMA**



Seven-year-old Caleb Lai performs



One of the many pieces of artwork made by the students



Josh Chua Yaozhang (Class of 2014) chaired the organising committee of WAD. He is the current Vice-President (Welfare) of the Student Council at Duke-NUS. He is also the college representative of Sheares College, one of the four colleges in the school. Josh did his undergraduate studies in accounting and neuroscience at the University of Washington, and later neuroscience research as a visiting scholar at Stanford University. He is also an accomplished musician, having composed three musicals which have been performed publicly.