

## PEER SEMINAR ON AUTISM

### **M.L. WONG underscores the importance of promoting accepting communities for children with special needs.**

COMMUNITY integration and inclusive education are important basic concepts which underpin current research into how we can enable persons with learning disabilities to grow and reach their maximum potential. This simply means that the person with a disability should be educated, work and live in an inclusive setting alongside their non-disabled peers rather than in a segregated environment, invisible to the rest of the community.

Some may argue that this ideal might not work in every situation because persons with learning disabilities are still being subjected to discrimination and denied basic life opportunities, affirmative social policies and support.

For inclusive education to work for the individual, we need a depth of understanding, a generosity of attitude and real commitment from the principal, class teachers, the family members themselves and the community.

This is exactly what happened in the case of Charmaine Chan, a student with Down syndrome at SMK Yaacob Latiff, Cheras, Kuala Lumpur. The positive attitude of the principal and class teachers, the supportive environment of the school, and her dedicated parents enabled Charmaine to succeed in more ways than one. One area which is often overlooked is the importance of support from peers in school.

As a society we appreciate individualism, acknowledging that we are all born different. However, when an individual stands out because of his behaviour, looks, speech or actions, he often ends up standing alone.

This scenario is often faced by a person with learning disabilities who is shunned by his peers because they do not understand him. Which makes the friendship between Charmaine and her classmate, Sohvana Lakshmi, so heart-warming.

Reaching out a hand in friendship may seem like a simple task, but when the person at the other end is disabled, it can become a real challenge in many ways.

It was a challenge that 12-year-old Sohvana Lakshmi took up when she befriended her classmate, Charmaine, who was born with Down syndrome. Both were in SK Taman Segar, Cheras, then.

Sohvana, now 15, shares that her first impression on seeing Charmaine walking into the classroom was one of surprise.

“My friends and I were asking, ‘she is not a normal girl, why is she coming to our class in a normal school? Why is she not attending a special class?’” Sohvana recalls.

So Sohvana’s first challenge was to step through the veil of ignorance and fear to be nice to someone who looks and behaves differently.

It was also a challenge to win the trust of Charmaine, who hesitated to accept the extended hand of friendship.

Sohbana recalls: "When we first became friends, our schoolmates avoided me. They thought I had Down syndrome too. They asked me, "How could you befriend her? She cannot play games, she is so slow.

"I told them that Charmaine is also just like them; she happens to be special and she is really nice when you get to know her."

It must have taken great courage for a 12-year-old to face such negative peer pressure and stand by her special friend.

Charmaine admits that if it were not for Sohbana, she would have kept to herself. It was Sohbana who included her in the various class activities.

After a few months, Charmaine's circle of friends grew in school as the other students realised that she was really not so different from them.

Research into the subject of friendship and promoting accepting communities for disabled persons emphasises the fact that we have to start as early as possible in preschools so that young children grow up learning to accept children with disabilities in their midst.

It has also been shown that it takes just one person to make a difference in changing mindsets and breaking the psychological barrier. And like the bridge builder that she is, Sohbana paves the way for others in her community to understand and accept such special individuals as the friendship the two girls forged in class has expanded to include their two families.

The confidence that Charmaine has gained is evident in her dealings with her teachers and classmates, making going to school an enjoyable and integrative experience.

As for Sohbana, her friendship with Charmaine has taught her patience and tolerance, and she has gained a better understanding of people who are different.

*One Voice is a monthly column which serves as a platform for professionals, parents and careproviders of children with learning difficulties. Feedback on the column can be sent to [dignity@tm.net.my](mailto:dignity@tm.net.my). For enquiries of services and support groups, please call Malaysian Care (03 9058 2102) or Dignity & Services (03-7725 5569).*

*THE Network for the Needs of Children with Disabilities (Perak) and the Paediatric Department of Hospital Ipoh are organising a workshop on autism on June 30, 8am to 5.30pm at the Hospital Ipoh, 4th Floor Ambulatory Care Centre.*

Speakers include psychologist Helen Salter from Australia, and consultant paediatricians Dr Amar Singh and Dr Wong Woan Yiing. Registration fee: RM150.

For enquiries please call: Lee Lai San (05-545 1878), Wong Woan Yiing (05-242 4811) between 9am to 5pm or e-mail: [needs@streamyx.com](mailto:needs@streamyx.com).