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# DAWN

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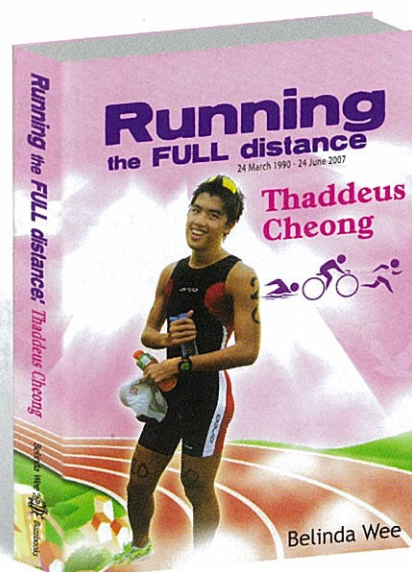
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In her first literary effort – *Running The Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong* – GP, Dr Belinda Wee, pays tribute to her nephew who lost his life while pursuing his dream to become a triathlete representative at the 24th South East Asia Games.



# The Words That Bind

**D**r Belinda Wee and I are seated in the comfort of her home, where everything is going on as per normal. Her daughter is overseeing a pie baking in the oven as its soft and buttery aroma wafts in the air. Minutes later, her son returns home; hungry after a long day in school, he is lured by the sweet pastries on the dining table. Meanwhile, her husband hurriedly picks up the telephone receiver when a trill cuts through the air, interrupting the soft murmur of conversation spilling from the guestroom TV set into the dining hall. He takes off after hanging up the phone; there are errands waiting to be done. A car rumbles to life and he's gone. This unblinking ordinarieness, however, belies an earth-shattering incident which rocked the household just a year ago.

Hanging on the wall, the photograph of a beaming young lad, sun-bronzed and toned in his running gear is a reminder of the passing of a close family member – Thaddeus Cheong, who fainted and died after completing the 24th South East Asia Games triathlon time trial, while clocking his personal best timing of 2 hours, 9 minutes. It was 24 June 2007 when this unexpected tragedy left Dr Belinda Wee with one nephew less.

## From Start ...

Borne out of love and loss is the biography, *Running the Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong*. Dr Wee began working on the book three months after the fateful event. "Thaddeus passed away trying to win a medal for Singapore and I thought that was very generous of him ... this is my trophy to him," Dr Wee says softly.

There's a very personalised aura about the book. The cover of the book is pink – Thaddeus' favourite colour. The cover design is conceptualised by Dr Wee's son while Dr Wee's daughter, who edited the photographs and manuscript, also helped to produce the accompanying CD which contains two songs written by church members – Angel's Serenade was played when Thaddeus' hearse was exiting the house and You Have Fought the Good Fight was specially written in memory of him.

The title, inspired by the Biblical verse which was chosen for Thaddeus' epitaph couldn't be more appropriate. The up-and-coming sporting talent had completed his final race before collapsing at the finishing line and in his short 17 years, he had lived a rich life, touching the lives of many others in the process – undoubtedly, he had run the full distance.





Dr Belinda Wee



Alas, memories, even the beautiful and meaningful ones, will fade with time and realities of the past will become a distant haze – it's a harsh fact which doesn't elude Dr Wee, who felt that the best way to remember Thaddeus was to hold on to something concrete. And what better way, than a book to remember him by. "We're all human and no matter how much we love a person, if we don't record it, we will eventually forget some things," she maintains, in spite of her mother's opposing belief that the biography would rake up sad memories.

The surprising revelations that she learnt about Thaddeus during his wake sealed her determination to produce the biography. Many relatives, friends, triathlon team-mates and schoolmates spontaneously shared stories about Thaddeus' goodness – from the parishioners who remember him as a polite chap who always greeted them, to grateful students who received free tuition from the bright teenager.

The book is not only a celebration of a life well-spent or a source of healing, where loved ones may draw comfort from past memories set in a tangible form. It is meant to serve a greater purpose – Dr Wee had written it in the hope that Thaddeus would be an inspiration to others.

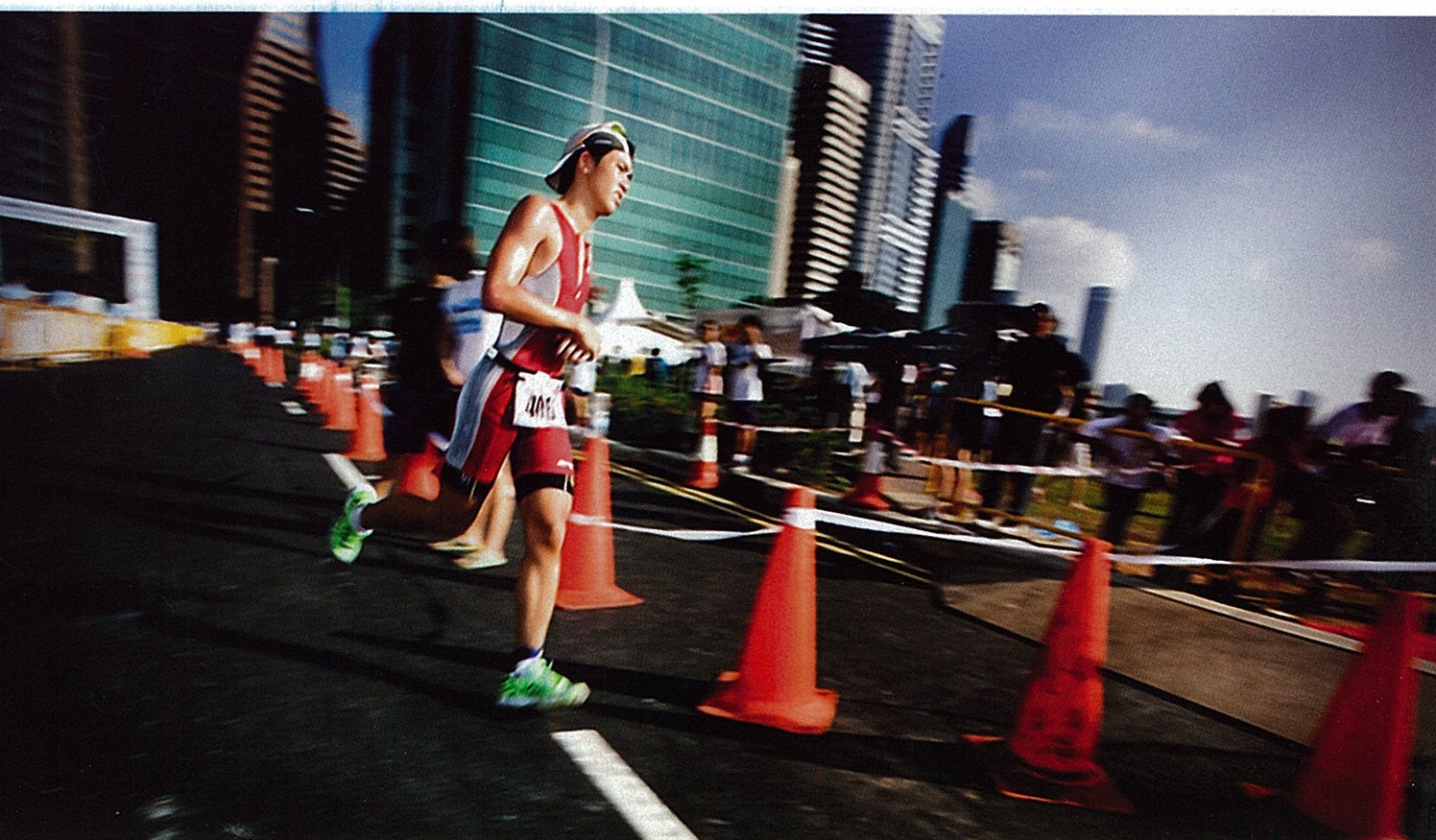
Speaking fondly of her nephew, like a mother would of her child, Dr Wee says, "Thaddeus was an exemplary young man. He had great sportsmanship, he was enthusiastic

and passionate about everything he did, and above all, he had many traits that teenagers could learn from – like humility, filial piety and dedication."

Even Dr Wee, a respected GP who is a mother of two, readily admits that she herself has picked up lessons from her quiet-achieving nephew who never bragged about his victories, nor let his left hand know what his right hand doeth. "I've learnt to be humble ... a person can achieve a lot without letting others know about it. The satisfaction should come from yourself, knowing you've done what is right, what is good," she says.

After a pause, she continues, "A lot of times, we do things out of duty. For instance, as we get older, we may lose sight of our initial burning passion for medicine. Thaddeus has reminded me that we live this life but once and we must live it to the best of our ability, not in a half-baked manner."

Most importantly, Dr Wee hopes that Thaddeus' story will help parents and teenagers understand and appreciate each other more. From the feedback Dr Wee has received from her readers, the universal appeal of *Running the Full Distance* is evident. The book has reached out to people from all walks of life – teenagers, avid sportsmen, people coping with the loss of loved ones and patients diagnosed with depression have likewise connected with her writing.







The biography starts at the beginning of time, from tiny Thaddeus' days in the blastocyst stage, all the way to his after-life when he ends up in a heavenly place. Apart from certain segments which are written in Thaddeus' voice, the rest of the biography is from the first person narrative of Dr Wee's point of view. "I was afraid people might think it's a bit schizophrenic," reveals Dr Wee, "But I felt that was how it should be presented." Schizophrenic or not, the biography comes across as heartfelt and it is an easy read – a mighty good literary effort.

The sweet fruits of labour did not come without the stoic support of Thaddeus' parents, Angie and George, who were involved in the proof-reading process. Prior to the tumultuous period, although Dr Wee and her sister Angie lived just down the road from each other, family and work commitments kept them occupied without much opportunity for interaction. It was a situation of 'so near yet so far'. But working towards the common goal of producing the best book for Thaddeus drew the sisters closer.

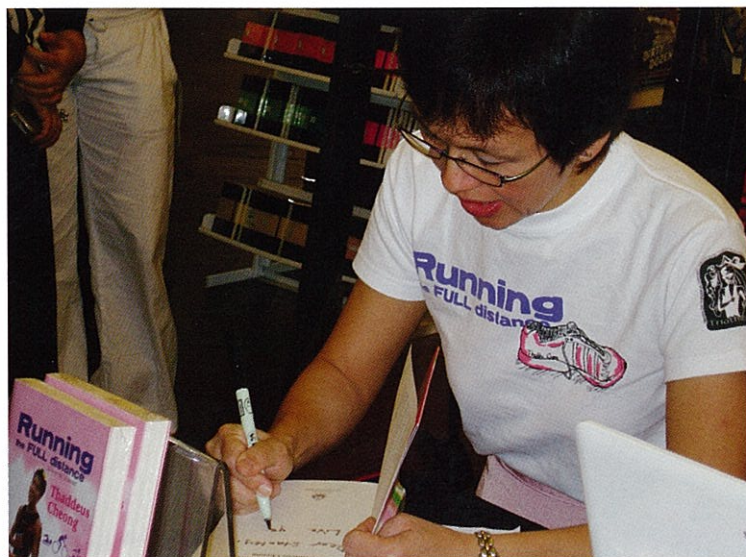
Trying to overcome her emotions while putting the words on paper proved to be a more trying task and there were times when Dr Wee was overwhelmed by emotive moments. "The most difficult part for me was writing about the afternoon that Thaddeus' hearse came back from the embalmers." At the mention of this, her face seems to cloud over. But apart from this emotional glitch which impeded her creative flow, most of the words came easily and in two months, she had the text all ready.

As with most writers who try to get their debut work printed, the stumbling block emerged when Dr Wee had to convince a publisher that her work is worthy to be sold on bookstands.

### To Finish ...

Dr Wee aimed to launch the book on 24th March 2008, which would have been Thaddeus' 18th birthday. Failing which, she would have launched it during his one year anniversary in June. She made it to the first deadline, and the very first thing she did after getting a copy of the book in her hands was to sign a copy and put it in Thaddeus' niche. "It's his book and he should get the first copy ... I hope he likes it," she says, her lips curling up into a small smile.

24th March which otherwise would have been a thoroughly sombre day, turned out to be bitter-sweet and eventful. It rolled off with the book launch at Thaddeus' alma maters, Catholic High School and Raffles Junior College. This was followed by a special evening mass in church, where a huge turnout gathered in memory of Thaddeus and in support of the launch of his biography.





Says Dr Wee with a thoughtful nod, "We try to look for the positives among the negatives. And I think this book has accomplished that in its fruition."


Several book signing events have since taken place. One was at the Kinokuniya outlet in Takashimaya and the other, at VivoCity's Page One. The former was Dr Wee's first autograph event and it gave her the jitters, "I was very worried that I would be the only one there," Dr Wee recalls with a chuckle. Her fears turned out to be unfounded, as a warm crowd turned up in full force.

The book-signing programme included a poignant sharing session by Angie who spoke about the loss of her child, a talk by two coaches on how to avoid accidents while training for a triathlon, a performance of the songs dedicated to Thaddeus in the CD and a book-reading session by Dr Wee.

I ask Dr Wee to guess how Thaddeus would feel about this biography, to which she replies, "I don't think he likes his

achievements broadcasted. But I hope he appreciates that we are trying to help other people through his life, not to boast about it in any way." Indeed, it's all for a good cause. Even the proceeds from the book sales will be channelled towards a church building fund for the indigenous people in Betong, Sawarak.

Is *Running the Full Distance* going to be Dr Wee's one and only literary effort? The good news is - probably not. The not so good news is that, the next book might be on another dreary topic which hits close to home. "I'm considering writing about what it's like to live with a family member who is afflicted with dementia," says Dr Wee, whose father has been suffering from this illness. "In Singapore, it's a very real problem. There are lots of old people with chronic illnesses."

I have a feeling that Dr Wee has just begun running the course to authoring more books, so I'll keep my fingers crossed that there'll be a third offering which is brighter and cheerier. 

*Running the Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong* is available in Times Bookstore, Kinokuniya, Page 1 Bookshop, Popular and Running Lab. Retailing at \$14 (including GST).

