

Runner's 'letter from heaven'

Nine months on, Thaddeus Cheong's family still grieves for him

Bernard Koh

IT HAS been almost nine months since Raffles Junior College student Thaddeus Cheong, 17, collapsed and died of heart failure after finishing a South-east Asian Games triathlon selection race, but his family is reminded of him everywhere they turn in their home.

A framed photograph of him smiling is propped up next to the television. The shocking pink couch the family sits on was chosen by him.

By the staircase is a small memorial corner, heaped with picture col-

lages and condolence notes. His room has remained mostly untouched.

Even when the Cheongs go abroad on holiday, they take along photos of him.

Now, his aunt Belinda Wee, 44, has written a 200-page book on his life and achievements, titled *Running The Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong*.

It will be launched at RJC on March 24, the day he would have turned 18, with proceeds going towards building a church in Sarawak for the indigenous people there.

Dr Wee, a general practitioner, says Thaddeus was like a son to her.

"If I didn't put into writing the thoughts that came to me at the wake, like it or not, details will fade with the years," she says.

"The book is the best way to re-



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IN REMEMBRANCE: Thaddeus Cheong's aunt Belinda Wee (right, with his father, mother and brother) came up with a book to remember the boy who died after a South-east Asian Games triathlon selection race.

member a boy who died trying to get a medal for Singapore, a heroic effort I hope Singapore won't forget easily."

The book, with photographs from his infancy to his teenage years, is partly a biographical retelling of his life and partly fiction, as she imagines what he would have thought as he finished his last race.

She also includes a chapter titled *Letters From Heaven*, written in his hand, which she hopes will comfort readers who have had tragedy befall their families.

She decided to self-publish the book, which is distributed by Singapore Press Holdings.

Some publishers she ap-

proached thought it was too personal a story to be commercial. One said that no one could speak for Thaddeus.

Dr Wee says: "I don't want to put words in Thaddeus' mouth, but the tributes that poured in from his friends and my closeness with him and my sister's family helped me construct and confirm what was near enough to his own voice."

Thaddeus' mother, IT professional Angeline Cheong, 46, teared up when asked about the grieving process.

She says: "My husband and I still don't have the courage to pack his things. We take his white uniforms out to wash sometimes, so they don't turn yellow lying there."

"The good thing is when I die, I know I'll get to see my son again."

Included in the book is an anecdote on the stirrings of first love Thaddeus experienced in junior college. He was to introduce a girl he liked to the family on his father George's birthday last May, and had given her a purple Nike water bottle.

"He told me, 'Mummy, it's still not confirmed so I'm not bringing her home yet. I promise, by your birthday in December, I'll introduce her to you'."

But that day never came.

During his wake, two girls came

up to her, one introducing the other as the girl Thaddeus was interested in. Mrs Cheong asked about the water bottle, and it was good enough as proof.

"So I quickly said, take photo, take photo," she says with a rare weak smile. "I finally got a look at what kind of girl my son liked."

Like his brother, the Cheongs' younger son, Thomas, 13, is a triathlon enthusiast.

Mrs Cheong says: "Many people have asked me, 'Are you sure you'll let him continue with it?' But if that's what he wants to do, we'll support him."

More stoic is the father, Mr Cheong, 46, a human resource professional.

"Thomas had a thorough medical check-up, so that allayed our fears," he says.

"It has been depressing, but I have to take life in my stride. Our Catholic faith dictates we accept what happened. It's good I still have Angie and Thomas, both of whom I live for today."

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> *Running The Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong* (\$14 with GST) will be available from March 24 at major bookstores and selected Buzz pods.