



# “we will always *remember* him”

It's hard to move on after your 17-year-old son dies after completing a triathlon, but Angeline Cheong heals by keeping his memory alive.





**SOMETIMES, ANGELINE CHEONG** imagines that her elder son has gone away for his studies. Other times, she tells herself it's a bad dream and she'll wake up to find him safe and sound at home.

Nine months after the sudden death of her first-born Thaddeus, a 17-year-old triathlete, the 46-year-old IT consultant is still trying to come to terms with reality.

There is nothing worse than losing a child – and you can hear it in Angeline's voice as she fights back tears in search of the right words to say: "Nothing has changed... Time hasn't eased the sorrow, and we still think about him a lot."

#### HIS LAST RACE

It's even harder for Angeline because she witnessed the last minutes of her son's life.

Like any of Thaddeus' previous races, the one on June 24, 2007, wasn't any different. It was the South-East Asian Games selection trial – an event the promising young triathlete was adequately prepared for.

It was a Sunday and, as usual, Angeline, her husband George and their younger son Thomas, were at the finish line at Changi Coastal Road to show their support. As Thaddeus crossed the finish line in third position, clocking a personal best of 2hr 9min, the family clapped and cheered. But within minutes, he collapsed in front of them.

"He looked exhausted, which was expected after a race, and was cooling down when he suddenly fell to the ground. We were in a state of shock and panic. An official rushed him to Changi General Hospital and we followed," says Angeline.

Choking back tears, she adds: "Initially, the A&E doctor who tended to him thought he had drowned. He said Thaddeus' heart had stopped beating and that he'd try his best to resuscitate him, but they failed to bring him back."

#### EVERY MOTHER'S DREAM

Thaddeus was the pride and joy of any parent. He excelled in sports from a tender age, and started training as a competitive swimmer at seven. Many medals and trophies later, at 13, he was invited to join the Triathlon Association of Singapore's Iron Kids programme in 2003. He also did well in school, going from Catholic High to Raffles Junior College.

"He was a saint on loan to us," says Angeline, with a rueful smile. "He was every mother's dream. He was very obedient and courteous, did well in his studies and in sports. He had a knack for assembling and fixing gadgets and electronic things, and we used to tease him that he'd become an engineer one day."

"We feel really sad that he went before the prime of his life. I know he's in heaven, but I can't help



Thaddeus after one of his many races.

**"I know he's in heaven, but I can't help feeling sorry that he's missed out on all the earthly joys."**

feeling sorry that he's missed out on all the earthly joys."

One consolation for Angeline is knowing that Thaddeus had been an inspiration and role model to his friends – something she only found out after his death. "We heard about the nice things he did, like giving Maths tuition to weaker schoolmates and friends. I think some 1,000 people turned up for his three-day wake, and we still receive Thaddeus' friends at our home every few weeks."

#### HEALING AND REMEMBERING

In fact, Thaddeus' presence is very much alive in the Cheong residence.

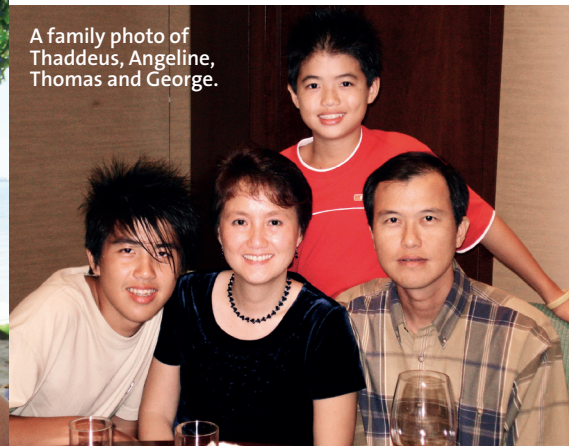
A collage of photographs of him at the finish line of various endurance races decorate the living room of the semi-detached home. His 25 pairs of running and cycling



Angeline was always there to support her son.



A family photo of Thaddeus, Angeline, Thomas and George.



shoes are stacked neatly below the photos. His room has been kept the way it was – even his white school shirts are still hanging in his wardrobe.

A month after Thaddeus' death, Angeline and George fixed shelves in the attic to display the more than 110 trophies and medals he had amassed over the years.

"It was his idea to turn the room into a nice place where he could hang out with his friends. There's a pool table and a music player, and just a few weeks before his death, we'd gone to Ikea to buy wooden shelves as he'd wanted to display his awards in the room.

"We never got down to fixing the shelves, and now that he's gone, we felt it was important to complete it. When his friends visit, we show them the room and his medals."

This is how the family heals and deals with the loss, says Angeline. It's tough, she admits. "Every day after work, we go to his niche in our church. Thomas, who turns 14 this year, has written many letters to his *kor-kor* and placed them in the niche. Whenever I think about him, I'd go to his room and talk to him. Sometimes, my husband and I cry to ourselves."

Angeline's younger sister Belinda Wee has written a book, *Running the Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong*, to help the family deal with the grieving process and to inspire others to live life to the fullest. The launch of the book will coincide with his 18th birthday on March 24.

## MOVING ON

Thaddeus' death has taught the family to live each day like it is their last. "When we want to do something, we go ahead and do it happily because we never know when

In happier times: on a family fishing holiday.



"When we want to do something, we go ahead and do it happily because we never know when our last day is."

our last day is," says Angeline.

What's most important to Angeline now is that she still has her family. And although Thomas is also an aspiring triathlete under the Iron Kids programme who aims to represent Singapore in the inaugural Youth Olympics in 2010, she is determined not to let Thaddeus' death affect her support for her younger son.

"Of course I'm worried – I've taken Thomas for a full body screening and I always remind him to stop if he doesn't feel well. I'm not going to tell Thomas to not do this and that, as it would stifle him.

"If we support our children in the pursuit of their dreams, we'll have no regrets no matter what happens. I'm praying that it's the right decision and I'll leave the rest in God's hands. What I must do is stand by Thomas and encourage him to do his best, lead his own life and excel in his own way." **SH**

## >> GET HELP

**Are you grieving, and in need of some inspiration?**

Pick up a copy of *Running the Full Distance: Thaddeus Cheong* (\$14) from major bookstores. Or place your orders online by sending an e-mail to belinda.wgc@gmail.com.