

Ex-fashion model turns role model

38-year-old rises above spinal cord tumours, relationship problems to help those in need



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Poesy Liang walks with a noticeable limp. Her legs, you see, are lazy.

"I cannot feel them so I walk with my eyes," she explains chirpily. "In fact, I can't feel temperature on my right leg. You could probably barbecue it while I'm talking to you and I wouldn't feel a thing."

It was not always like this. Ms Liang, 38, once strutted around in stilettos and lived the high life. One of Kuala Lumpur's most sought-after models in the 1990s, she was also a TV personality who mingled with the beautiful set and was wooed by wealthy men.

But three operations to remove life-threatening tumours around her spinal cord changed not just her gait but also her life.

The high-maintenance woman morphed into a lauded multi-hyphenate: philanthropist, jewellery designer, motivational speaker and an artist who not only paints but also writes, sings and composes music.

Bubbly and vivacious, Ms Liang has the easy confidence and mellow maturity of someone who has had her youth stretched by both pleasure and pain.

Indeed, the peaks and troughs of her life would make a great TV soap: fame in her early teens, near paralysis a few years later, a dramatic recovery, a series of failed relationships, relapse, and several self reinventions.

She is the younger of two children. Her Malaysian father is a former businessman, and her Taiwanese mother is an acupuncturist and Chinese physician.

Her early life was a tad unsettling because her father lost a lot of money after setting up a maritime antiques business in the 1980s.

"He was emotionally affected and never quite bounced back from his business failures," she says, adding that the family moved often and her mother helped to make ends meet.

Although their circumstances were not easy, Ms Liang was given lessons in ballet, music and Chinese painting and carving from a very young age.

Naturally artistic, the former student of Bukit Bintang Girls' School in Kuala Lumpur staged her first art exhibition at 11.

At 14, she beat a host of more experienced models to land the lead role in a much-coveted TV commercial for Levi's.

Her brother – now a finance executive in Hong Kong – had a friend who ran a modelling agency and suggested that she try out for the job even though she had never modelled before.

"They told me to turn up in tight jeans and high heels so I wore a pair of my mother's. I had really long hair then and I remember my brother's friends cutting my fringe and making me walk up and down the carpark before going into the audition," she recalls.

Her fresh face and the high-profile commercial made quite a splash.

"Everyone went, 'Who's that girl?' and all the casting houses wanted me on their list," says Ms Liang, who went on to land big jobs shooting commercials for the likes of Coca-Cola, Kao Biore, Vidal Sassoon, Lux and Hazeline Snow.

"I guess I had a naturalness with the camera," she adds.

She became pretty seasoned at playing truant but did well enough for the Malaysian equivalent of the O levels in 1992. She went on to complete a diploma in architecture engineering from the Federal Institute of Technology in Kuala Lumpur.

But tragedy struck when she was 17. She started getting unsteady on her feet, often tripping and spraining her ankles.

Visits to doctors did not help. Her condition deteriorated rapidly and she was almost a paraplegic before she finally went to see a radiologist. "He took one look at me and straightaway sent me to the hospi-



ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Ms Poesy Liang with a half-completed painting of rooftops, a recurring theme in her art pieces. She is working on a series featuring felines on the rooftops of Peranakan houses in Singapore.



Ms Liang in a photo by Tung Yue Nang after she shaved her head, and in a photo by Roman Jehanno before the shave.

tal. He was sure I had a growth somewhere," she recalls.

True enough, extensive tests revealed she had a tumour on her spinal cord.

The prognosis was bleak. Even after the tumour was removed, her doctor told her she might not walk again.

The fighter in her kicked in. "My dad was diligent, he made sure I went for physiotherapy three times a week. He invented things for me to exercise my legs," says Ms Liang, who walked back into her office one year later in high heels.

At 19, she got involved with a man 11 years older. He was a futures trader and, she says, bad news. Emotionally manipulative, he involved her in his debts and financial problems and even made her a bankrupt.

She tried to get away from him by leaving for Taiwan, hoping to make it as a singer.

She networked heavily and knocked on doors with her portfolio but did not make any headway. Her jazzy style was a hard sell in an industry where middle-of-the-road pop reigned supreme.

She returned a year later and became the host of a music show on Malaysian TV station NTV7, and later had a brief stint as a futures trader.

The older man inveigled his way back into her life.

"We had broken off but he managed to be in my life for a good seven years. I lapsed into depression and couldn't date other people properly. I let people down and screwed up relationships," says Ms Liang, whose messed-up life saw her breaking up with two decent fel-

Letting go of bitterness

"I still have my bitter moments, of course, but I'm not letting the bitter run my life. If you're bitter, you can't help others. You just have to learn to let go."

MS POESY LIANG, on the trials and tribulations in her life

Still a place for money

"Money is still very important. You can use it to help many people. I still want to lead a nice life but I want to do it on my own."

MS LIANG, who had dated several wealthy men

lows, a banker who encouraged her to pursue her executive MBA with Southern Cross University, and a Taiwanese businessman.

Things came to a head when her father came to her one day and knelt on the floor.

"He said, 'You have changed so much I don't recognise you any more'. Seeing my father cry shook me up," she says.

She finally severed all ties with her boyfriend. To rebuild her life, she started an interior design company. Not long after, she was courted by a man from a wealthy family. The relationship lasted nine years.

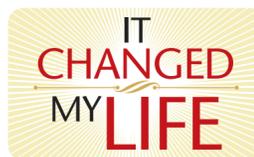
In 2003, she decided to go for an extensive medical check-up.

"I had a feeling I needed to do it, I hadn't had one in seven years," she says.

The tumour had returned, with a vengeance.

"I was not even surprised when I got the results," she says.

Coiled around her spinal cord was a serpentine mess of blood vessels, scar tissue, old tumours and



It Changed My Life is a weekly series about lives that have been dramatically changed by events, people or circumstances



PHOTOS COURTESY OF POESY LIANG

it to stand up again," says Ms Liang, who then set up a jewellery design business.

The kindness of her friends who rallied around her in her time of need inspired her to start Helping Angels on Facebook in 2006.

Her idea is to build a bridge on the social networking site for those who need help and those who can offer it.

The group has four principles: no fund-raising, no commerce, no politics and no religion.

Instead, it encourages people to practise random acts of kindness so that it becomes a lifetime practice.

"We just want you to engage with your skills and your heart to help someone," says Ms Liang, who for instance nurtures the artistic talents of refugee children every week.

She and her volunteers have also started Thursday Tutoring, a programme to tutor underprivileged children in several shelters and homes in Kuala Lumpur.

"I'm out of darkness because I extended myself to help others. It changed my life, I'm sure it will change other people's lives too," she says.

Helping Angels has taken off in a big way and spread beyond Malaysia to Bali, Thailand, Taiwan, the US, Europe, Africa and Hong Kong.

Its members all over the world rallied together and dispatched 160,000 pairs of socks to those affected by the earthquake which rocked Japan in 2011.

Two years ago, Ms Liang started the Bald Empathy Movement, also on Facebook. Among other things, the project set out to raise sensitivity towards cancer survivors and others suffering from chronic illnesses.

To draw global attention, she roped in several international photographers – including Christian Barz in Hamburg, Rio Helmi in London and Roman Jehanno in Paris – to document, pro bono, her crowning glory before she shaved her head bald at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011. Singapore photographer Tung Yue Nang took pictures of her after she went bald.

While working on the project in Europe en route to Cannes, Ms Liang's money ran out.

"I had only 200 euros left and I had two months before I got to Cannes," she says.

So she hightailed it to an art supplies store, got herself the necessary paraphernalia and started producing whimsical paintings of animals, angels and moons which she sold on Facebook and on the streets of Paris.

She made more than enough to see her through the trip, and even buy a business-class ticket back home.

A Japanese gallery owner was so taken by her whimsical paintings that he advised her to expand her Rooftop Cat Series.

Ms Liang is currently developing a series of paintings featuring felines on the rooftops of Peranakan houses in Singapore. A manufacturing company here has already ordered one.

Her musical ambitions have been revived too after a chance meeting with Godfrey Wang, who was the late Teresa Teng's last music director.

He has taken her under his wing, and they are wrapping up Ms Liang's debut album, which she recorded at his studio in London.

The jazzy album – which she hopes to release early next year – will feature two of her own compositions and 10 cover versions of classics such as Swinging On A Star and La Vie En Rose.

Her music will also be featured in an animated film about her life that she is currently working on with a team of Singapore animators.

Ms Liang, who was Malaysian magazine Her World's Woman of the Year 2011, says of her life: "I've been stupid many, many times. I've let people down, but that was my past life. I think I've been getting rid of my negative karma and now there are many positive things in my life."

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WATCH THE VIDEO
www.straitstimes.com

The making of Poesy Liang's Rooftop Cat



Download a QR code reader app on your smartphone and scan this code for more information.