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— Nur Amirah Amir, with her mother

# Rising above cancer

# Five

# distinctions

# despite year

# in hospital

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For a year, her second home was the hospital where she was being treated for cancer.

When Nur Amirah Amir, 16, returned to school in the middle of 2012, it was with a wig and a renewed determination to catch up on her studies.

The Pasir Ris Secondary School student had five distinctions for her N levels this year.

The results were announced last Thursday.

"I was so worried. I've been studying hard for the past 1½ years," she said.

In Secondary 1 and 2, she barely passed English and never did well in Science.

But the cancer changed her.

She began to read more and studied even if no test was coming up.

"Before I was sick, I played music, danced, watched television... I didn't really study," she said.

Nur Amirah said the new Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP), which allows direct entry to a diploma course, was a source of motivation.

Her aggregate of seven points is well below the cut-off of 11 to qualify for the programme, which she hopes to take for an eventual course in business accounting.

"I'd like to be an accountant or auditor. I love calculations," she said.

**FALLING ILL**

Sickness struck in the middle of Secondary 3, when Nur Amirah had chest pains for a few weeks.

A general practitioner said he could hear wheezing near her heart. Doctors found a tumour and a first biopsy showed a normal growth.

But a second biopsy showed she had a second-stage Malignant Rhabdoid Tumour.

A 10-hour open heart surgery followed, as well as nine cycles of chemotherapy and 25 sessions of radiotherapy.

The operation, during which a 500g tumour pressing on her heart was removed, was the only time she feared death, Nur Amirah said.

"The doctors said there was a 10 per cent chance of death. I was really afraid," she said.

After surgery, she was in intensive care for four days. In less than a week, she started on chemotherapy.

"It was tiring. I had all the side effects – vomiting, nausea, bitterness in throat, ulcer in the mouth.

"Sometimes, it was painful all over and my hands were numb."

Each chemotherapy cycle took at least three to four days in the hospital.

She would be hospitalised extra days for checks and ended up spending most of the year there.

**WITHDRAWING FROM FRIENDS**

"When I started on chemotherapy, I pushed my friends away and didn't let them see me.

"I didn't want people to see me in that condition," she said.

"I was frustrated, but I had to go through it. Sometimes I was in denial, but I kept on thinking God will always be there, my parents are there."

Family members stayed in the hospital with her so she was never lonely, said Nur Amirah, who has a sister, 18, and two brothers aged 3 and 13.

**HARD WORK:**  
Nur Amirah said that the cancer changed her. She began to read more and studied even if there was no test.  
TNP PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

Her father, Mr Amir Ramat, a 46-year-old cargo coordinator, said: "We thought, why must she be the one? We felt it's not fair and she deserves a better life. As parents, we wanted to see her succeed and have a family."

**THE COMEBACK**

Nur Amirah said going back with a wig was daunting.

She said: "I was scared people would talk about it because I looked different. But I was welcomed on my first day. Everyone was so kind."

She flourished in school, receiving an award for good character last year and the Eagles award for good leadership and service this year.

She was also a student councillor and the vice-chairman of the Malay Dance troupe.

Her physics and form teacher, Madam Siti Mariam, 42, praised her resilience.

"She was able to adapt and contribute," Madam Siti said.

"They could see this and nominated her as class chairman. She earned the respect of her peers. When she speaks, they listen."

## He hopes late mum is proud of him

When St Hilda's Secondary School student Neo En Cheng collected his N-level results last Thursday, he found he had done well enough to make it to Secondary 5.

He went home tell his cancer-stricken mother the good news, but she was too ill to respond.

She died last Saturday, two days after he collected his results. She was 43.

En Cheng's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2011.

Tumours were later found near her bladder and in her intestines.

Her condition became critical after he took his N-level examinations, he told The New Paper.

"We told her to stay strong, to stay with the family. She said that yes, she'd get healthy."

At the start of this year, his cousin recommended tui na (massage) to Mrs Neo.

The family went to a Buddhist temple to learn how to administer the massage.

For about a year, En Cheng would give his mother a half-hour massage before heading to school and would walk with her in a nearby park after school.

He studied after school before returning home and massaging his mother again at night.

He tried to focus on his studies, but his mother's cancer was always at the back of his mind.

En Cheng was slightly disappointed with his 14-point aggregate, but hopes that his mother is proud of him.

"For my N levels, she just told me to work hard, to keep on studying."

He remembers her congratulating him when he did well enough to transfer from the Normal (Technical) to Normal (Academic) stream at Secondary 2.

"I didn't do well in my Primary School

Leaving Examinations. So I told them that when I went to Secondary 1, I wanted to be promoted," he said.

Last year, he was third in class and received the Good Progress Award.

En Cheng's principal, Mr Khoo Tse Horng, said: "(Mrs Neo) might not tell En Cheng this, but she told me that she has no worries about him as he's mature and disciplined."

**FAMILY TIME**

En Cheng's father, 43, is an army engineer. His also has a sister, 20, and two brothers, 18 and seven.

After his mother fell ill, the family began spending more time together.

They had picnics at Marina Barrage, went prawning and cycling at East Coast Park and even swimming.

In school, En Cheng had help from his teachers, who gave him after-school

**PROGRESS:**  
N-Level student Neo En Cheng hopes to continue doing well in his studies to make his late mother proud.  
PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

consultations.

From Secondary 2, his principal also coached him in science.

"When I moved to Normal (Academic), I wasn't passing most of my subjects. But then I started to ace my science and it motivated me to do better in my other subjects."

He has received the school's Boon Soon Neo Award for academic excellence twice, as well as the Good Progress Award and the Edusave Character Award.

His form teacher, Mr Seow Whei Jie, 32, said: "In class, he helps his peers in maths and science."

He added that based on conversations with him, En Cheng comes across as resilient and filial.

"Because of his mother's condition, he became mature and sensible. We saw that change in him. He wants to do well to do his mother proud."

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