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Conference calls for support for bright, young minds

BY LEE MEI LI



Parents of gifted children are hoping for more avenues to nurture their children's talents.

Adrian* may be only nine, but his academic abilities far surpass any 14-year-old's. Instead of whooping with joy, his mother, L.L. Then, is concerned about her son.

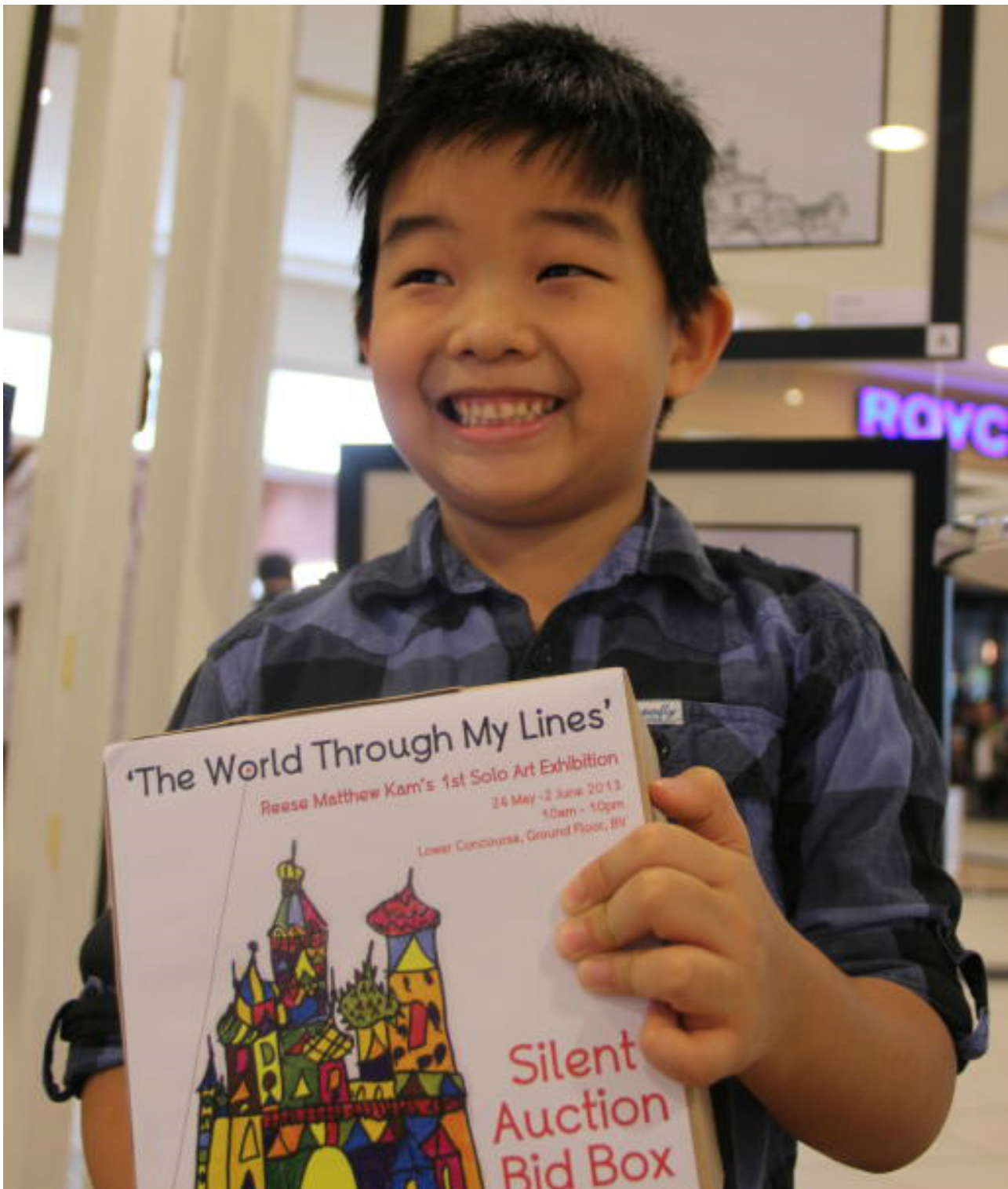
Adrian has trouble relating to his peers and would rather sit with his nose in a book on flight MH370 conspiracy theories than participate in group activities with his peers, which he deems “boring”.

“We noticed that he had a hard time making friends when we enrolled him in kindergarten. It was also hard getting the teachers to like him, because he would often complain about being bored in class,” says Then, 42, who didn't want her son's name revealed. She did not want her relatives and friends to refer to him as a “genius”.

Instead of being perceived as a bright, young mind, Adrian was told that he had to “learn to fit in, or go to school somewhere else.”

Then considered herself a “lonely mother” who couldn't speak to other parents about her son because that would be “showing off”. Her situation brings to light the challenges of dealing with a gifted child.

While help is available for special needs children with disabilities, there is limited resources when it comes to helping families cope with a gifted child.



Wise beyond his years: Reese Matthew Kam started drawing elaborate landscapes at the age of three-and-a-half.

In a bid to dispel myths about “giftedness”, Then, who is now the vice president of the National Association of Gifted Children Malaysia (NAGC), has teamed up with the committee to organise the upcoming Gifted Asia Conference 2014, in partnership with Monash University Malaysia.

To be held at the university’s premises in Sunway, Selangor on Nov 1, the conference aims to provide greater know-how on nurturing giftedness, and hopes to inspire the audience into becoming enablers for supporting gifted children.

The keynote speakers include Malaysia-based Dr Karen Jennifer Golden, clinical psychologist and senior lecturer at Monash, Dr Ille Gebeshuber, a Professor of Physics from Austria, Dr Leonie Kronborg, a senior lecturer and coordinator of Postgraduate studies in Gifted Education in Monash University Australia and Dr Inderbir Sandhu, who holds a PhD in Educational Psychology (Gifted Education) from the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Teenage music prodigy 14-year-old Megan Loh will also be speaking about her experiences of being a gifted child.

“The term ‘gifted’ is often misrepresented – people tend to associate giftedness with academic performance, but that is not always the case. One gifted child is different from another. They could have great verbal reasoning, or excel in artistic abilities. Unfortunately, society expects gifted children to be all-rounders, which complicates matters,” says Golden.

Giftedkids.about.com points out that gifted children can harbour an immense fear of failure, being the perfectionists that they are. This may cause a gifted child to avoid failure by refusing to even try something, including a homework assignment.

Having a keen observation, imagination, and ability to see beyond the obvious can also cause a gifted child to appear shy, holding back in new situations in order to consider all the implications.

Gifted children are also often misdiagnosed by psychologists and healthcare professionals, according to an article on the website of US-based non-profit organisation SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted). The most common misdiagnoses are Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (OD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and mood disorders such as Cyclothymic Disorder, Dysthymic Disorder, Depression, and Bi-Polar Disorder.

Golden, who will be speaking on fostering gifted leadership at the conference, touches on the term “twice-exceptional”, which refers to intellectually-gifted children who have some form of disability, like attention deficit disorder, that prevents the child from learning effectively in a traditional environment.

NAGC committee member Florence Wong’s son Reese Matthew Kam, eight, has a talent for drawing detailed landscape imageries and is considered an art prodigy. But during preschool, teachers had labelled Reese “naughty” because he would not sit still and refused to take instructions.

Therefore Wong has taken to homeschooling Reese as she believes it’s a better learning option for him.

Then also homeschools her son. She quit her job in manufacturing and went on to obtain a Diploma in Education so that she could supervise her son's education. The mother-of-four is currently pursuing a degree in Master of Education.

Like Then, Wong recognises that homeschooling is only a temporary solution. "I'm doing all I can to meet his needs now but my biggest worry is if he will be able to integrate into society later on," says Wong, 38. She hopes that there would be more pull-out programmes for gifted children in the country, apart from the three-week summer camp for gifted children by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), which is only offered to public school students.

Then and Wong's children are also not eligible for enrollment in other programmes for gifted children as they do not attend public school.

Though NAGC organises monthly hands-on workshops and excursions to allow gifted children, some of whom are homeschooled, to interact with one another, both Then and Wong acknowledge that more needs to be done to broaden the children's horizons.

According to Golden, having a supportive family is essential to helping a gifted child go the extra mile.

"Whether or not a child gets to expand on his gift really depends on the family and how much support they are willing to give to him. To some families, as long as their child is happy, that is already considered a success story," she says.

Golden cites the case of 15-year-old Jeshaiah Khor, who was awarded a special Jeffrey Cheah Foundation-Monash University Scholarship in 2013 and is currently a second-year engineering degree student in university. Khor's gifted journey had begun when he started reading the newspaper at 18 months old.

Khor was home-schooled up to the completion of his O-levels. In an article last year, his father H. T. Khor had said that their family "never pressured him to do anything except to let him do his best in whatever he wished to do."

"We hope that the conference will help educate not just parents, but also teachers on how we can all work together to tap into the talents of these gifted children. Giving academic support is one thing, but there is a need to look further ahead at how these children can contribute to global solutions, where some of their skills can even be utilised in today's technology," says Golden.

For more details on the conference, visit [Facebook.com/myNAGC](https://www.facebook.com/myNAGC) or e-mail admin@nagc.my to book your place.

**Name has been changed.*

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