



Photographer Bob Lee (without glasses) conducts Photography UnLtd, a photography workshop exclusively for youths with autism. He was also a participant at the Project Infinitude performance on Saturday, a musical showcase put up by 20 children aged five to 13, including four children with special needs. The project allows children to experiment with instruments and singing. PHOTOS: MARVIN TANG/SUPERHERO ME, JASON QUAH

Photography, music help children with disabilities connect with society

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SINGAPORE – Photography and music may be serious endeavours for some, but they are also tools for integrating people with disabilities into the community.

The past weekend saw the finale of

two projects that had used these activities as lenses to the hearts and minds of those living with autism, as well as children with cerebral palsy and other developmental delays.

For 24-year-old Joshua Yeo, a photography workshop for autistic participants, which concluded yesterday, not only helped to hone his photo-taking

skills but also taught him how to communicate with others.

“Josh learnt to approach someone and ask for permission to take their picture and to understand why some may not be comfortable with him doing so,” said his mother Karen Yeo.

Mr Yeo, who was diagnosed with autism when he was 10, started experimenting with photography two years ago and enjoys taking portraits as well as candid shots of people.

“He’d take seemingly random shots of people’s feet on the carpet or even his own facial features, like his tongue,” Mrs Yeo added. “Because we found it very hard to communicate with him, these photos gave us some idea of how he looked at things.”

So she jumped at the chance to sign him up for a workshop by veteran shutterbug Bob Lee, who customised classes for the autistic students, for example by doing away with technical jargon, conducting demonstrations using soldier figurines and roping in carers as “photography assistants”.

Mrs Yeo said photography has also encouraged her son to befriend others in the community: “He’d go around the neighbourhood to take photographs of people, so now he knows our neighbours better than (I do).”

Mr Lee, 40, formerly a photojournalist with Singapore Press Holdings, started working with people with special needs after his son, Jun Le, 10, was diagnosed with autism in 2009.

“It was only then that I got interested in learning about this community of people and exploring different ways of reaching out to them,” he said.

Unlike instructing able-bodied individuals, the goal of teaching photography to persons with disabilities, such as through the recent workshop held over six Sundays at the Enabling Village, is not to groom future shutterbugs, Mr Lee added.

“Perhaps one or two of them may have an eye for photography, but what’s more important is to give them an opportunity to get out of the house, interact with different people and

spend time with their family members,” he said.

Incidentally, Mr Lee dropped his instructor hat and put on another as a participant, together with his wife and son, in a musical showcase on Saturday put up by 20 children aged five to 13, including four children with special needs.

The project, a collaboration between social initiative Superhero Me, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and local conductor Wong Kah-chun, gave children with disabilities and children from low-income families opportunities to experiment with instruments and singing.

Participants were inducted into a three-day music camp in November and trained in their respective instruments, such as the violin, cello and recorder, from January to March, culminating in Saturday’s musical.

Jun Le’s mother Lim Hwee Hwee said it was valuable for children to be exposed to other children with special needs while they were young.

“The children at camp would initially observe and ask why Jun Le behaves differently, but they gradually learnt how to look out for him,” she said. “Kids are less judgmental and less likely to pigeonhole (persons with disabilities).”

As a conductor, Mr Wong, 31, said he hoped the initiative can help to quash the oft-held notion that “music is a luxury”.

“Music is a universal language with no barriers, and we want to give everyone an opportunity to connect with this art form,” said Mr Wong, who set up Project Infinitude last year to spread the love of music to less privileged children. The ensemble will perform again at 3pm this Saturday at Alexandra Hospital.

Both the photography and music workshops were held at the Enabling Village and supported by the TODAY Enable Fund, set up last December to foster greater empathy and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the wider community.



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