

Pushing for greater recognition

➤ Activist Stevens Chan is a lifelong advocate for the differently-abled

■ BY MARK MATHEN VICTOR

ONCE an entrepreneur with a storied background in banking and insurance, everything fell apart for businessman Stevens Chan when he lost his sight due to glaucoma at the age of 45.

However, Chan bounced back soon after, becoming a community worker, activist and social entrepreneur. Within a span of a few years, he formed the Malaysian Glaucoma Society in 2009 in an effort to fight and stop unnecessary blindness. He and his wife also formed SOS Missions Bhd, a non-profit organisation aimed at extending their work to others with disabilities, particularly children and teenagers.

"In 2012, I formed the Dialogue in the Dark chapter in Malaysia. It is part of an international group of social enterprises which started in Germany. They are also our enterprise vehicle to continue our community work rather than to depend on donations from the public and corporate sector," said Chan, 58.

"It was an art event featuring various forms of artworks curated by students and established local artists on the subject of eyesight in our continuing advocacy work," he said on the Journey of the Sight 2012 event that he organised and curated.

"We organised a few more Journey of Sight events after that, and then I curated and organised our inaugural Art Includes 2019, which was to feature the works and performances of both local and foreign differently-enabled established artists through a conference, workshops, an exhibition, a market place, concert

and 'Dining in the Dark' event that culminated with a street festival in Medan Pasar."

"The vision was to playfully ignite more creative talent among our young disabled Malaysians."

On how he managed to do everything that he has, Chan said it was from his nature and networking abilities.

"I'm a very irritating person. I went and irritated a lot



The exhibition section of the inaugural Art Includes 2019 festival.

Chan's appreciation of art comes from his wife, who explains in detail what he cannot visually see. — PICTURES

COURTESY OF STEVENS CHAN



of friends. Throughout my years of work in Dialogue in the Dark, we have had many international partners, and I managed to come across many differently-abled artists."

Constantly pushing forward, Chan noted proudly that there are quite a number of disabled artists in Malaysia, but the trouble lies in the fact that there is no platform to showcase all this talent.

"What I want and hope to achieve is to curate a common platform to bring out all these artists," he said, adding that the artworks are not limited to traditional artforms such as painting, but also sculptures, photography, dance and different forms of culinary arts as well.

"We have had cooks who are blind. There was also a blind up-and-coming barista. Then there is Wan Jamila, who has won many local and foreign awards for her paintings. Two notable others include Jacob, who aspires to be an artist, and Pang, an aspiring professional dancer. Jamilah is autistic, Jacob sits in a wheelchair for life due to a genetic brittle bone disease and Pang is visually-impaired."

Ultimately, Chan is hopeful that Malaysians will look at these artists and accept them for who they are.

"Not just because they are disabled, but rather as creative artists who are showcasing their talents. That is what we always hope to achieve, that these people are seen for their capabilities rather than their disabilities."