Fresh shot at life spurs cancer survivor to be national archer

Keller Chai, 21, went through rounds of chemotherapy after she was diagnosed with leukaemia at six years old. Her life changed when she picked up archery while studying in a polytechnic.
Keller Chai, 21, spent a good part of her childhood in hospital after being diagnosed with leukaemia. Weak and sickly for many years, she decided four years ago that she would no longer be held back by her illness. The national archer tells The Straits Times about her journey from "the bottom".

Tan Tam Mei

If anyone had told Miss Keller Chai's younger self that she would one day be a national athlete, she would have laughed it off.

The childhood cancer survivor, now 21, has never taken a physical education class in her life, but she is now a national archer.

"I was weak and sickly when I was younger and because of the cancer, I also became very withdrawn," said the Nanyang Technological University undergraduate.

Struck by leukaemia when she was six, the youngest of four girls spent most of the next two years in and out of hospital. Her older sisters are now aged 24 to 32.

She had come down with a fever that lasted for 10 days and was referred to a specialist at KK Women's and Children's Hospital after a doctor at a clinic sensed something amiss.

"They did many blood tests at the hospital. And I remember my mother holding me in her arms when the doctor broke the news," recalled Miss Chai.

While she was too young to understand her diagnosis, she remembered her mother sobbing.
"My mother never cries, so I started crying because I was scared. I knew it was something bad."

Then began the whirlwind of blood transfusions, medication and chemotherapy. She went through three cycles of chemotherapy over two years, during which she lived with a portacath - a device that gives direct access to the central vein - inserted into her chest to facilitate the treatment.
TOUGH JOURNEY

A lot of times, I seriously considered quitting. But I felt that if I didn’t cherish this, then I wouldn’t have anything at all. So I stuck it out.

MISS KELLER CHAI, on the journey to making the national archery team.

SECOND CHANCE

Nature tried to take me out of rotation, so I feel like I have to earn my place in this world, redeem myself in that sense. I don’t want this second chance to be wasted on me.

MISS CHAI, on what motivates her.

While Miss Chai’s parents were able to pay for the medical bills with their Medisave savings, her mother, who is a nurse, switched to doing permanent night shifts so that she could care for her daughter in the day. Her father, a technician, took over at night.

The twice-weekly treatments at the hospital were a nightmare for the little girl.

Her mother, Madam Glenda Loo, 60, said the mere mention of the word “KK” would cause her daughter to burst into tears.

“Every time I saw her getting pricked or poked, I wanted to cry too,” said Madam Loo. “But I couldn’t cry in front of her because I didn’t want to scare her.”

As a result of the chemotherapy, Miss Chai was often too sick to eat. Her hair also fell out.

“That was tough,” said Miss Chai, who started primary school a few months after her peers and discovered that keeping up in school was the least of her problems.

“Kids can be cruel - they teased me because I wore a bandana to cover my bald head.”

A handful of classmates even called her a “princess”, resenting the kindness shown to her by the teachers. “I kept quiet and gritted my teeth,” she recalled.

The bullying eventually stopped, but as a result of her experience in school and the ordeal of being so sick, Miss Chai became quiet and withdrawn.

“For many years, I couldn’t shake that nagging question, ‘Why me?’” she said.

In Primary 3, she went into remission but there was no relief.

“Every day I was scared that the cancer would come back,” she said. “I should have been happy, but I wasn’t.”
Things took a turn for the better when she was studying at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and decided to try something new.

"I wanted to challenge myself and step out of my comfort zone so I decided to pick up a sport for the first time," said Miss Chai, who graduated last year with a diploma in molecular biotechnology.

When a friend heard she was interested in picking up archery, he tried to discourage her at first.

"He said it's an expensive sport and if I'm not willing to give it my all, then I shouldn't start at all," she said.

It became a personal challenge to prove him wrong.

"I went for the first session and I loved it," she said.

Using her savings from various part-time jobs, Miss Chai bought her first bow for $2,100. But getting past the first hurdle was a struggle, even when it came to holding the 2kg bow. She took longer than her peers to learn the basics.

"Everyone had a better fitness level than I did, since I had been excused from exercise for so long, but I decided to take part in everything and not drop out from any of the physical training."
"I kept pushing myself. I like to win and I really don't like to lose."

In 2015, about a year after Miss Chai started archery, she took part in a competition despite having an injured shoulder.

"I remember joking with my coach (before the competition) that I was in pain and I wanted to give up. But she said I couldn't give up until 6pm, which was when my competition started.

"I don't like people telling me where my limits are, so I told myself that I would last until 7pm."

That night, despite the odds, she bagged six medals.

The journey to making the national archery team in December last year was also not easy. She often asked herself if she was really cut out for the sport.

"A lot of times, I seriously considered quitting. But I felt that if I didn't cherish this, then I wouldn't have anything at all. So I stuck it out."

Miss Chai has participated in national archery competitions and regional tournaments such as the Asian Games Invitational Tournament, the Kedah Open and the Bangkok Asia Cup.

She is currently training for the Asean University Games in Myanmar in December, if she gets selected for the team.

Reflecting on her journey, Miss Chai said her motivation to improve comes from the feeling that she has been given a "second chance" at life.

"Nature tried to take me out of rotation, so I feel like I have to earn my place in this world, redeem myself in that sense," she mused.

"I don't want this second chance to be wasted on me."

She hopes that others will be inspired by her story to keep trying.

"As an athlete, it's always an emotional roller coaster. You don't always improve and you have your downtime as well. It's the same with the journey in life."