

# Strong, single mums

Raising baby after husband left Finding courage to go on after soulmate died



ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOQ

In tears, Ms Faridah Ali Chang called a dear friend to say she did not know how to bathe her newborn daughter.

Being a new mother at age 37 was overwhelming, but deeper trouble lay ahead. Nine months later, Ms Ali Chang became a single mum when her husband left the family.

Over time, she picked up the pieces and powered on. She pursued a master's degree in psychology when her daughter, Ms Aeriqah, was in Primary 6.

Now 58, she is principal trainer and consultant at Rainbow Centre Training & Consultancy, as well as a psychologist who coaches parents of children with special needs. She is also an accomplished singer who loves jazz and writing lyrics.

Today, her daughter, now 20 and talented like mum, is an indie folk singer-songwriter. She studies broadcast media at Lasalle College of the Arts.

Because Ms Aeriqah was only two when the divorce was finalised, she has pretty much been cared for by her mother all her life and "doesn't know any different", Ms Ali Chang says.

"I have always shared with Aeriqah the good things I know about her father. I think it is important for her to know this as a child," she says of her businessman ex-husband, who provided for their daughter and saw her weekly when she was younger.

At 21, the Malay-Muslim Ali Chang was part-timing as a session singer and helping out at her sister's restaurant when she met her Singaporean Chinese beau.

She shelved her plans for further studies, married him and jetted off to the United Arab Emirates, where he was based. They lived a privileged life there, as well as in the United States and the Philippines in the ensuing years.

The trailing spouse clung to the husband whom she admired. When she was 27, he encouraged her to complete her pre-university and college in Australia, where she lived on her own. He would visit in between his frequent travels.

At 37, after 16 years of marriage, she gave birth to her daughter. But barely a year later, he walked out, citing irreconcilable differences. Ms Ali Chang was lost and went through an awkward year when she was "not really myself".

But she knew she did not want to stay down in the dumps. She propped herself up with her loving circle of family, friends and in-laws. She also devoted herself to her work uplifting the vulnerable, which was "very grounding", as well as being strongly maternal yet playful with her daughter.

As Ms Aeriqah sees it, her extroverted mother is extremely nurturing and hardworking, as well as lots of fun as a travel companion, whether they are fine-dining in Japan or driving to Malaysia.

"She is also in the arts, so when I wanted to pursue the arts, she was very supportive," Ms Aeriqah adds. "I don't think of her as a single mum because she's very capable. She's just mum."

They both remember the successive years when Ms Aeriqah was around seven and intent on taking part in One Minute Of Fame, a talent show for children in Singapore.

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**INDIE FOLK SINGER-SONGWRITER AERIQAH** on her mother, Ms Faridah Ali Chang (both above), principal trainer and consultant at Rainbow Centre Training & Consultancy

They would wait more than five hours for an audition before she got to sing for one minute. Ms Aeriqah never won, but never gave up.

Reflecting on those days, her mum, still bemused, says: "Aeriqah never compared herself with others. I never compare her with others."

"She does not worry about her offspring. 'From the time she was young, she has been an old soul. She's cool. She's clear about what she wants. She's serious as an artist.'"

Her daughter is deep into song-writing, plays the guitar, blogs and has a YouTube channel, called life-of-a-wombat. She also volunteers at a soup kitchen and is sensitised to people with disabilities.

Ms Ali Chang has chosen to live quite simply since becoming a single parent - "I can have luxury and I can have leftovers" - and makes sure her daughter is grounded.

"I sent her to ballet school in Toa Payoh, not Bukit Timah, where we lived."

For Mother's Day this year, they recorded the song Ibu (Mother in Malay), for a music video celebrating the small everyday victories of motherhood. It is produced by Focus on the Family Singapore, a pro-family charity.

"We sang the last part together in English. The lyrics are 'Mother dear, you are the queen of my heart,'" says Ms Ali Chang. "It's a dream come true, performing together."

Being a mum has turned into an enduring dream, even if earlier dreams were shattered.

A wisdomfulness may return, especially at weddings. "That's me missing the ideal," she says.

Will she recapture the ideal by re-marrying? "Oh my goodness, I'm in a good place. It's one of those situations where 'I don't fight it and I don't seek it.'"

And so she has become more philosophical. She embraces "red-ha", a beautiful Arabic concept that alludes to contentment and acceptance.

"I am not bitter. I am a conflater of my fears," she remarks.

Her parents brought her up to be a strong woman and "to be the best version of myself" - life values she, in turn, is conveying to Ms Aeriqah.

"I'm first of all a mum. She was the one who made me safe and sane when I was in turmoil. When I held her, I was 'home'," Ms Ali Chang says, looking back.

"I enjoy my daughter. She's going to be all right."

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**I felt very tired and helpless. I was thinking about what people told me, that time will heal. But I looked at the tyre and realised that if I sat there and did nothing, the air was not going to go into the tyre.**



**LAWYER NANCY THIO**, who knew she had to recover from her grief about three months after her husband's death, when the tyre of her car burst on an empty road

Mother and son watched YouTube intently to figure out how to knot Noah's necktie for school when he was in Primary 5.

They spent three hours navigating this rite of passage for young men - a little accomplishment even if the tie looked imperfect.

Lawyer Nancy Thio has also taken Noah, now 12, to car showrooms and bought him the Top Gear automobile magazine. Her late husband Thomas Tan, who was a fund manager, had passed his love of fast cars to their youngest child before he died of colon cancer at age 38 in 2011.

Since becoming a single mum, Ms Thio, who is in her 40s, has been thrust into the occasional role of dad to Noah and his sisters Natania, 15, and Natalie, 18.

The couple were best friends and soulmates who graduated from the same British university, where she read law and he studied accountancy.

Life was ideal for the young couple. "We were married five years before we had kids. We travelled the world. I loved him very deeply."

At work, Mr Tan was promoted quickly and posted to Australia, Hong Kong and South Korea. They were relishing the good life when he was diagnosed with cancer, an illness they fought together for two years. She stopped working to care for him.

Four days before Noah's fourth birthday, he died.

One of her first acts of love as a newly single mum was to hold the funeral just before her son's birthday. "I didn't want Noah to associate his birthday with his father's death."

To be a parent is already tough, she points out, and her early season as a widowed mum proved to be "an overwhelming, lonely and brutal journey".

Her children, seeking attention, were all acting up. One daughter stuffed toilet rolls down the bathroom drain, causing a clog. She was regressing to her younger self, when she most vividly remembered her father, a counsellor later explained.

Another daughter kicked a chair at the wake and shouted that she had failed in her promise to bring daddy home from hospital. Her son got into fights in kindergarten.

"There were times when I wanted

to run away from my children. I felt like an evil mother," she says.

She hid in the gym, drank to numb her pain and took midnight drives alone. "I was physically present for the children, but emotionally absent. I couldn't deal with the fact of raising them on my own without my beloved husband."

She hated being a widow and imagined her husband was overseas on his frequent work trips. "My identity was very derived from my husband. He was a very intelligent man who rose from zero to someone people looked up to. He was a very loving and responsible father and husband."

"I had self-doubt and self-pity and I couldn't go out with friends who were couples. I was labelled a widow and felt my family was incomplete without a father."

Like many widows, she suffered insomnia during his illness and for years after his death. "I was always afraid he would need me in the night and when I woke up, he might be gone."

The turning point came about three months after his death, when the tyre of her car burst on an empty road.

She remembers sobbing by the kerb for an hour and angrily telling God: "This I also have to do."

The car had been her husband's domain, besides finances and household maintenance such as changing the lightbulbs.

"I felt very tired and helpless. I was thinking about what people told me, that time will heal. But I looked at the tyre and realised that if I sat there and did nothing, the air was not going to go into the tyre. I had to do something. In the same way, I had to take small steps to recover from my grief and help myself and my children. That was the turning point."

She signed up for counselling for herself and her children, who did sand therapy.

The family also joined the Wicare Support Group for widows and their offspring. It is run by volunteers who themselves have been bereaved. Ms Thio felt calmer after connecting with peers who were there to listen and empathise.

Wicare also opened her eyes and she began to be grateful for what she had. She encountered widows who had to take on two jobs, their

spouses having died in debt. Her own husband had called his insurer and lawyer within a month of his diagnosis, ensuring they would be taken care of when he died.

"This also allowed me to seek flexible work as a corporate and family lawyer and be present for my three children, which was what Thomas wanted."

Today, she volunteers at Wicare and Children's Cancer Foundation as their legal adviser and honorary general secretary. She also serves as an aggressor's legal clinic.

"I see the vicissitudes of life. Helping others is in turn helping myself," she has realised.

Another turning point was asking her children for forgiveness.

"They were like me - I was cold and angry and didn't want to show that I was vulnerable and grieving. We had been very sociable, but now we were withdrawn as a family."

She conveyed to them that "mummy can cry" and not build walls.

"Children are very forgiving," she says. Over time, the family grew closer and stronger.

Speaking separately to The Sunday Times, her children, tanned from competitive tennis, recall the day she sought forgiveness in 2015.

"I was shocked at first and didn't know what to say," says her second child, Natania.

"She's the strongest person I know. It is not only about raising three children, though we gave her a lot of trouble. I was young and didn't consider that she was grieving."

"We also apologised," adds eldest child Natalie.

Noah, who remembers his father teaching him numbers and being able to name brands of cars at age two because of his dad's influence, notices that his mum "acts like a father" sometimes. She consoled him after a low moment when he saw a schoolmate and his father hugging, which made him miss having dad around.

Mr Tan would take the family on holiday in June and December and Ms Thio took the plunge after two years, when her children were still young, around the ages of six, nine and 12.

Three women share the tough yet rewarding journey of raising their children alone



Lee Siew Hua

Single mums are the unsung heroines of parenting.

Whether unwed, divorced or widowed, they are compelled to be strong women who are both mum and dad to their offspring.

Tough as it is to be a sole breadwinner, a single mother is also very likely to be caregiver, cook, driver, homework helper, handyman, disciplinarian and nurturer, all rolled into one.

They are not an insignificant cohort in society either.

While the good news is that the proportion of households headed by single parents living with their children has remained fairly stable, ranging from 6.4 per cent to 7.3 per cent of all households between 2000 and 2017, one group of single parents stands out.

The ranks of single parents who are divorced or separated are trend-

ing up, according to a government report titled Families And Households In Singapore, 2000-2017.

Families headed by such singles have risen from 38.9 per cent to 47.8 per cent during this period, says the report published this year by the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

Overall, single-parent households are predominantly headed by women.

In this Mother's Day special edition, the inspiring stories of three single mothers, who have journeyed through tears and tumult to come up shining on the other side with their children, reveal the challenges and joys of motherhood afresh.

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Having a baby at 23 with no job or husband



**Because of Kieran, I found my calling and my husband.**



**DOULA GINNY PHANG-DAVEY** on her son

Kieran spent six weeks welding in Australia as well and has done internships in places such as China.

After 15 years as a single mum and nearly three as a married one, she says: "I have never been so relaxed in my parenting. Kieran goes to Andrew 95 per cent of the time and I'm not jealous."

Kieran asks his parents for a sister every other day.

She says: "I love children. However, we are going through a very busy developmental period and expansion in our businesses, which leaves me hardly any time for anything more."

"We are content with our three chocolate labradors as an extension of our family for now, while putting plans in place to create space and time for another baby."

Looking back, she marvels that the child she chose not to abort has brought such abundant gifts to her life. "Because of Kieran, I found my calling and my husband."

Pregnant at 23, she had no husband and no job, only numberless fears about the future. She was on the verge of popping abortion pills, but killing her unborn baby was a prospect more traumatic than bringing up a child as an unwed mother.

A supportive aunt advised her: "Flush the pills. Then figure out what to do."

She did that and took her first steps into the unknown.

"I couldn't sell my soul by aborting Kieran. I had been very maternal from young," recounts doula Ginny Phang-Davey, 41, a birth coach who has supported more than 1,000 births since 2003.

Her son, now 18, played a significant role in connecting her to her Australian husband and also in her calling as a doula.

She met her husband Andrew Davey, 38, an executive coach, when she enrolled her son in a youth camp in Sydney. Mr Davey was a camp speaker, while she was a volunteer crew member.

She asked if he was willing to mentor her son, then 15, and they continued talking on the phone and during visits in the months ahead.

Within six months, they wed. It was the first marriage for both.

"When you're older, you know what you want. I put everything on the table," she says.

She was clear about the kind of family life she wanted, how she wanted to continue empowering

women and "playing big" in life.

Married now for 2 1/2 years, she notices that Kieran, who is waiting to enlist for national service, is blossoming. "My son speaks to Andrew more than me. He had no father figure before."

Their parenting styles differ.

"Andrew doesn't give answers. He asks questions that enable Kieran to reflect and decide," she says. "I'm a bit like a 'tiger mum'.

But kids don't like to be told what to do," she concedes.

Both parents sense that Kieran is more relaxed and playful now. Like many children of single parents, he had to make sure his mother was fine. This is "enmeshment", explains Ms Phang-Davey, when the child takes the place of the absent spouse to an extent.

She had decided from the start never to speak ill of Kieran's biological father to him. Her former boyfriend proposed when she decided to keep her son, but he was not the right man to marry.

When he died in 2011 of a heart attack, mother and son attended the wake. Kieran, then 11, had never met his father.

"For the first time in his life, he truly believed he had a father. That helped him have a better sense of normalcy as he had never understood the concept of a father," she says. "His father's greatest gifts were life and death. He gave Kieran life and gave him closure," she adds.

While Kieran's biological father was never involved in his life and did not pay child support - she had to make all decisions about housing and care on her own - Ms Phang-Davey remarks that her child's schooling tops everything as the toughest challenge in her single-mum journey.

Kieran had learning challenges. Some months, she spent \$3,000 to \$5,000 on tuition alone. The financial burden was very stressful. "But apart from school, I really enjoy being a mother."

These days, Kieran, who attended the School of the Arts, pushes his own boundaries. He has done door-to-door sales for a charity 10 hours a day to stay hungry and "break down the walls around my heart", he says.

He has seen how his mum pushed herself and institutions alike.

Single mothers face obstacles in buying Housing Board flats, but she "contested" for a three-room HDB flat in Ang Mo Kio that she obtained at age 25 after writing to MPs.

She worked as an office manager after Kieran was born, but soon reinvented herself as Singapore's first certified local doula for the freedom of flexible hours.

She now runs Four Trimesters, where she works with a team of doulas and an association of international birth professionals. She also teaches antenatal classes in Singapore and globally on an online

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