

Causes Week: A more inclusive Singapore

Empowering autistic students through art

The Art Faculty has some famous customers – Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's wife Ho Ching sported a dinosaur motif pouch and clutch created by one of its artists at international events – but it had humble beginnings.

Run by the Autism Resource Centre (ARC) Singapore, the retail store, which now incorporates a cafe and an art gallery, started out as a shop in Pathlight School selling books, uniform and stationery.

"We expanded it to sell merchandise based on our students' doodles when we started noticing their ability to draw and their unique perspectives," said deputy executive director Jacelyn Lim.

While its students might have special needs, Ms Lim said the Art Faculty's intention was not to attract support out of pity and compassion. Rather, it was to launch high-quality products and services that also give consumers the opportunity to support the talents of its artists.

When Pathlight's artist development programme, offering profes-



Ms Jacelyn Lim, ARC's deputy executive director, flanked by Mr Caleb Lim (in apron) and Mr Victor Ong, the centre's creative director, at the Art Faculty's flagship store in Lengkok Bahru. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

sional art coaching, began in 2011, the store became a platform for students to showcase their abilities.

But it struggled to sell artwork. The Art Faculty then produced merchandise such as T-shirts and greeting cards embellished with the students' artwork.

"We realised with merchandise sales, the artists could earn more recurring income through royalties," Ms Lim explained.

Today, it has more than 900 products created by 40 artists, a mix of current Pathlight students and alumni, who receive royalties. With the help of its parent charity, ARC's Employability and Employment Centre, it also has four special needs staff members.

One of them is 23-year-old Caleb Lim, an alumnus of Pathlight, who is a barista in the cafe at the flagship store at Enabling Village in Lengkok Bahru. Customers can give him smiley stickers for good service, which he can then collect and redeem for a free drink.

The Art Faculty has another branch at Pathlight School and also runs an e-commerce site. Its products are also sold at Tangs and Commune.

While working with autistic individuals might not always be easy, ARC's creative director Victor Ong said they just need more understanding and patience.

"They can be misunderstood as volatile, aloof or crazy. But they

just have different preferences on communication, different methods to process information and different quirks to self-regulate and de-stress."

For former Pathlight student Sean Bay, now in his second year at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, coming up with designs for merchandise – such as sustainable straw sets and candles – is a way for him to say he belongs.

The 23-year-old said: "I hope to show that I am part of Singapore, with the kopi-o, teh-c and bandung motifs I drew."

Visit www.theartfaculty.sg/ for more information.

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