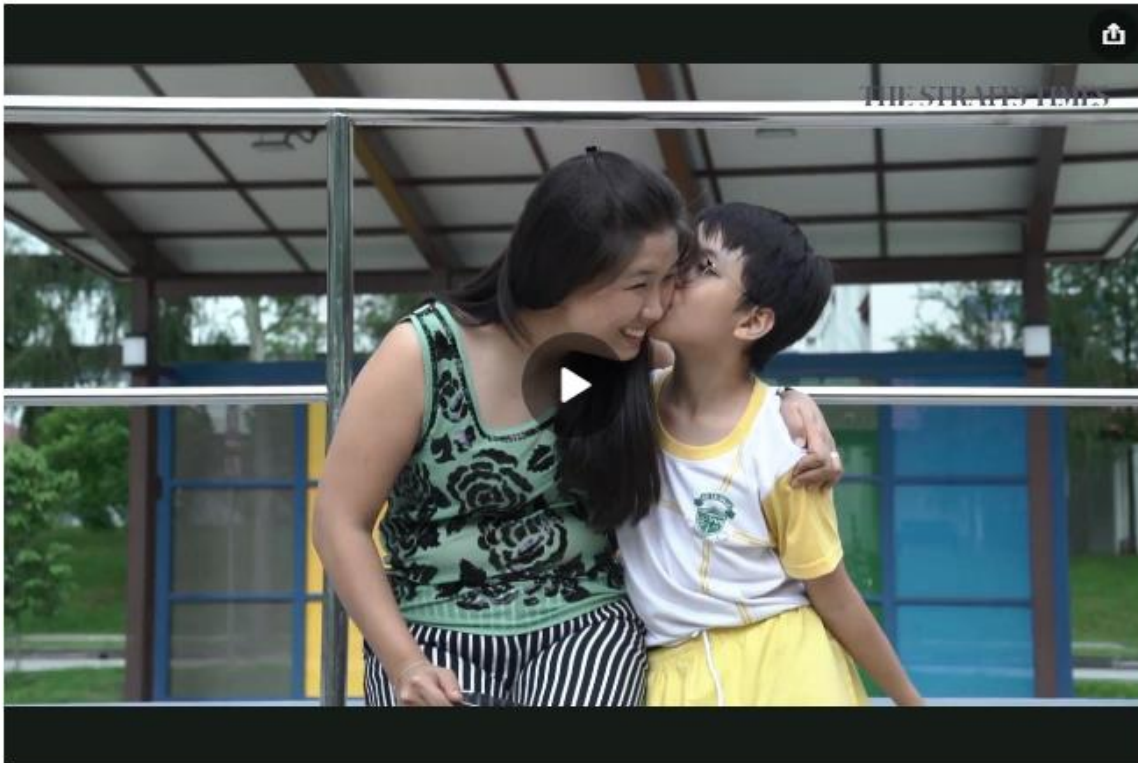


PREMIUM

Generation Grit: She juggles multiple jobs to support three kids and cancer-stricken husband



Ms Ju-ann Thong has had her share of troubles – at age nine, she found out she was adopted; at 26, she was divorced and had a young son to take care of. She remarried in 2016 but her husband was diagnosed with cancer a year later.

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Mother of three Ju-ann Thong has braved multiple storms in her life. She accidentally found out she was adopted, had a failed marriage and went through another abusive relationship that left her depressed and in debt. Her second husband brought the light back into her life, but he lost his job and was later diagnosed with a rare cancer. Through it all, Ms Thong soldiered on - juggling multiple jobs to feed the family - in this series on resilient millennials.

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SINGAPORE - Ms Ju-ann Thong was only around nine when she had a bombshell dropped on her during a visit to the doctor.

When her mother went to the toilet, the doctor told her: "Do you know your mummy is not your mummy? You have another mummy."

That was how Ms Thong, now 35 and a mother of three, found out she was adopted.

Ms Thong went on to ask her adoptive mother and was told that she was the third child from a poor family; her biological mother had a gambling habit and her birth parents gave her up for adoption.

She said: "At a young age, your parents are your world. I felt empty, insecure and I feared that I would be abandoned one day."

She said she cannot help but feel that way even though her adoptive parents - a retired logistics manager turned taxi driver and a housewife - treated her very well and never short-changed her. They have a biological son nine years younger than Ms Thong.

Ms Thong married young, at 23, but divorced her hairstylist husband after just three years as they had very different personalities. They have a son, Mathias, who is now 12.



Ms Ju-ann Thong and her son Mathias. PHOTO: LIN ZHAOWEI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

After her divorce, her life went into a downward spiral.

She got into a relationship with a man whom she later found to be an abusive gambler. The relationship lasted about three years and he left her with almost \$100,000 in debts, largely from a car loan.

After he fled the country, his creditors came after Ms Thong, who fell into depression, quit her property agent job and spent her time sleeping. In seven or eight months, she lost almost 20 kg and had to seek medical treatment for depression.

What got her out of her funk was her son.

She said: "Mathias would knock on my door and say, 'Mummy don't cry, I will wipe your tears'. He said, 'Mummy don't cry, I will hug you'. Without him, I wouldn't even step out.

"I thought: Do I want to be a leech on his life or do I want to lead him in life?"

It took about a year for her to recover from depression. And she found love again.

Three years ago, she met her second husband, Mr Brian Lim, a divorcee, through a mutual friend. But it was not love at first sight.

She was put off at first by how Mr Lim, 48, had tattoos all over his body. But he soon won her over.



Ms Ju-ann Thong met her second husband Brian Lim, a divorcee, three years ago through a mutual friend.
PHOTO: JU-ANN THONG

"He's very assuring, very attentive, very down to earth and his simplicity and sincerity won me over," she said. "And he did not mind that I'm a 'one plus one'", she added, referring to her son from her first marriage.

They tied the knot in 2016 and their daughter Meagan, now two, was born shortly after.

All was good until last year, when Mr Lim was retrenched from his sales manager job in a furniture firm where he earned about \$100,000 a year. He later joined another furniture company but it closed down.

Then last December, he was diagnosed with Stage 2 transitional cells cancer, a type of cancer that affects the urinary system.

Their youngest son, Mikel, was just three months old.

"I felt my world crashing. I was very afraid he will die, " said Ms Thong, breaking into tears. "Brian gave me a lot of light when I was at my lowest and now that my tattoo man is down, I must give him double or triple the light."

In March this year, she posted their love story on Facebook to ask her friends to pray for Mr Lim's recovery. The post went viral.

She received many offers of help when she shared that her family's finances were strained after Mr Lim lost his job.

The family, which employs a maid and keeps a toy poodle, had to survive on Ms Thong's income of about \$40,000 a year as an administrative executive. She has a business degree from the University of London through the Singapore Institute of Management.

The family's monthly expenses come up to \$5,000 or \$6,000 and their savings were "more or less" depleted by the time Mr Lim was diagnosed with cancer.

Thankfully, she had made him buy insurance before they wed. So his medical bills, which have added up to \$180,000 and counting, are covered by insurance.

To save money, Ms Thong has cut down on Mathias's enrichment classes and asked friends to help her buy milk powder and diapers from Johor Bahru, where things are cheaper. She also made and sold fried crab sticks and watches through online orders after work.

"Getting five hours of sleep a night is a luxury," said Ms Thong, who has to juggle not just her job and side businesses, but also take care of her children and a husband who is ill.



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"My kids are a very clear reminder that I should never crash. Their smiles keep me going every day. I know I need to be strong as they need me," she said.

Their finances are better now that Mr Lim has found a part-time job in a furniture firm. Ms Thong also secured a slightly better paying job as an administrator in a bank.

A group of mothers she befriended online has also rallied to support her. For example, they sold their bags and baby carriers and raised \$15,000 for her family.

Last month, Ms Thong won the Exemplary Young Mother Award given out by Jamiyah Singapore, a charity. She said she is honoured by the award and

is grateful for all the support she has received - even from strangers.

"When life brings you down, don't be ashamed to ask for help," she said. "Because when you ask for help, you never know what may come along."