

Andre



Andre Jeremy Tang Jia Rong
7 September 1994 – 12 July 2009

Andre was a miracle child to all who knew him. April and Ngai Kin were told that his Hypoplastic Left-Heart Syndrome was a terminal condition and he was only expected to live a few days. April tells how, against all odds, Andre lived for 15 years, with a lot of love, joy and laughter, and a strong faith.

Written by April Tang, Andre's mother

Twenty-two weeks into our first pregnancy, we were told in no uncertain terms that our baby was 'defective' and we were advised to terminate. He was diagnosed with a terminal heart defect known as Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome (HLHS)—the left part of his heart was unformed, restricting the proper flow of blood and oxygen—babies with such condition can only usually live a few days if they even survive the pregnancy.

We wanted to keep Andre, to give him an identity, and a chance at life and meeting those around him who already loved him so much even before he was born. We sought a second opinion from the wonderful Dr. William Yip, the best paediatric cardiologist one could ever have. He was understanding and compassionate throughout everything, and respected our wish to let our child live—and he supported us all the way till Andre's last breath.

We were told that Andre would live for 3 days, and we brought him home from the hospital to have him with us and to make the most of this short time. 3 days turned into 7 days, a month, 6 months, 6 years... and time went by as we lost count.

The first five years of his life were painful as his heart failed many times and we were told to 'be prepared' as he might not make it another day. Every day was like a time bomb waiting to explode. Nevertheless, we held on to our faith and stood strong as we bargained with God to let us keep Andre a little longer. Andre was a very special child. He always put all of us before himself and never complained of his pain.

Andre brought so much love and joy to all the people around him. Everyone who met him was strangely attracted to him and somehow would connect him into their lives. Andre made a difference. He was the peacemaker at home as well as in school, and helped take care of his two younger sisters who were two and five years younger than him. They grew up very closely as Andre stayed home most of the time though he went to a normal school. Andrea and Andreana simply adored their brother.

Cheeky as any boy will be, he was loved by many—schoolmates and teachers, friends and relatives.

As he grew older he became even more of an inspiration to others. He had a strong faith, and was walking testimony of our religion as strangers in and out of his school learned about his condition and marvelled at his courage to live and be happy despite knowing his end is near. He told those around him—*Live life to the fullest!*

We almost lost him soon after his 14th birthday in 2008, when he had a near death experience. He got worked up in an argument with another boy at school, and started to collapse. First he had a very bad headache, and then went into semi-consciousness. We rushed to take him from school to hospital, feeling panicked and not ready to let him go. We were so full of joyful relief when his condition stabilised and we were allowed to take him home. Andre told us all about what happened—he realised that death is a choice. The person at one point can choose either to go towards the light, or to retract and return to his body. As Andre was given a little more time, he chose to return to his body as we held on firmly to him and he felt our loving hands holding him during his semi-consciousness.

After this we all started to talk more openly of his approaching death, and his condition started to deteriorate. We started making a wish list of things 'to do' and a promise list to keep among us. We completed his list just 3 days before he said goodbye.

Andre chose to go for a cruise on the Royal Caribbean in January 2009 when 'Make-A-Wish-Foundation' offered him their 'wishing well'. We had our last family holiday together and the beautiful memories of that vacation will forever stay with us as long as we live.

Andre's condition worsened after the cruise. Dr. Yip confirmed that Andre's heart and lung pressure were building up, and that the blood vessels in his lungs were narrowing, which would give him more breathing difficulty as time passed. It was decided that Andre would be given palliative care at home, with medication to make him comfortable. Andre insisted on going to school as he wanted to be around his friends.

We asked Dr. Yip what to expect and what action we should take, should Andre's present condition take a sudden turn for the worse. We were told of the possibilities—he could develop a stroke, leading to a coma; he could cough out blood because of a small lung vessel burst due to high pressure, or he could be bloated in his stomach

and limbs due to heart failure. If any of these should happen, the family would have to prepare for the final hours.

It could happen in his sleep. We chose to keep all these possibilities from Andre and his sisters.

It was a traumatic period for us. Anticipating the worst and yet praying for the best and clinging on to our hope and faith. At first we checked on him constantly while he was asleep, keeping him under close surveillance. This was such a stressful time. Then we decided that we had to give ourselves up to the Lord and trust our lives, and Andre's last moments, into His hands. We felt that we can only do so much and worrying was not going to help. We prayed fervently that if it should happen, it would be in our presence, at home and in my arms.

Andre was so determined to go to school and be with his friends. But as his body failed him, he could only manage 2 hours a day (and Ngai Kin dropped him off and picked him up in the car as he could no longer manage public transport). He had some very special friends—Ahmed, Jeremy, Shawn and Xiang Rong—who were always there with him to help him with his school bag and water bottle. Jeremy piggybacked Andre whenever he got too tired and when they were in a rush to get to a class. Jeremy was his legs too when it came to climbing a flight of stairs. These boys were patient and kind. They never once 'abandoned' Andre or ostracised him because of his medical setback. Instead, they stood with him and were always there for him. They were his shield when some boys got nasty or teachers were impatient and irritated with him. It felt like they were God's Angels as Andre's bodyguards.

I took sabbatical leave to be with him. We visited his favourite places for the last time. The last item on his list was to own an ID, which we organised in school on 9 July. So Andre completed the list.

Promises were also exchanged among us. Our promises to him, and his to us. Andre made us promise to talk about him all the time and that he should always be the firstborn in our family. Andre promised that he will always be with us and he has kept his promise as he is now our guardian angel—we often feel his presence around us and we all talk to him a lot, especially his sisters. He is always there protecting and guiding them.

Andre tells us that we can find him when we open his laptop. He tells his sisters to look into the sky at night and if they see a twinkling star, it will be him smiling down on them. Andre and his sisters made a pact that he will always be there for them.

The fateful night came. 12 July 2009. Andre was 7 weeks short of his 15th birthday. It was a day like any other Sunday. Andre went to bed after his favourite cartoon show. Shortly after, I heard him shouting for me from his room. Something told me that the time had come... He was sitting up and his face was ashen. Andre refused any oxygen and didn't want to be rushed to the hospital, as he had put on his wish list that he wanted to be in his bed when the time came. He asked to be held in my arms, and he bid his dad and sisters farewell as we held on to him, telling him not to be afraid.

The next 30 minutes was spent holding him in my arms as I cradled him to 'sleep'. His sisters and dad held on to his hands and led him on as we said our last goodbye.

Life can never be the same. The void can never be filled. The pain remains though we learn to live with it as the pain stays in our hearts. It is as if there are four rooms in my heart, and when one room is emptied, it remains empty, as nothing can fill that space. His sisters yearn for his presence and feel so lost without him.

We wonder and worry that Andre will not remember us and if he saw us again, will he know we are family and we love him so much? Will we recognise him? Will he grow? Will he acknowledge us? Then he appeared in my dreams and reminded me of our promises. And our promises are to be kept. And I realised—he will always remember us and he is always with us. He communicates with his sisters in their dreams, reassuring them when they feel down.

We know we have to go on with our lives here as he must with his. He will not forget us. He'll be waiting when it is our time to join him.

We have had many beautiful dreams about Andre, telling us he is happy and whole, big and strong. No longer the frail little child we know.

One so precious will die twice. The 1st is when he dies and the 2nd time is when those who know him die and stop talking about him.

Our children will forever be our children—in life or death. They will continue to grow in our hearts...till we meet again...

April, Ngai Kin
Andre, Andrea, Andreana
February 2012

*God sees you getting tired and a cure was not to be,
So he put His arms around you and whispered "come to me".
With tearful eyes we watched you, and saw you pass away,
Although we loved you dearly, we could not make you stay,
A golden heart stopped beating, hardworking hands at rest.
God broke our hearts to prove us,
He only takes the best...*

– Ahmed Qabyr Maricar (Andre's best friend)

"Andre will always be an important part of us. Friends may forget, may in time adjust to seeing us without Andre, and it might seem easier for them to 'move on' and see Andre as a past chapter in our lives. But for us, he will forever be our Andre, forever be his sisters' brother and we will appreciate anyone remembering him, acknowledging his life, talking about him as a person, using his name without fear or discomfort. This will reaffirm for us the fact that Andre lived and is still living in our hearts and was and is loved dearly by those who knew him. Andre lives on."

– Dad