

ARTS

Portraits capture moments when dreams come true

Neil Li

life@scmp.com

Ever since she was a young girl, Gigi Chan Che-yu has loved Cantonese opera. She used to watch old Cantonese opera films and live performances with her family and was fascinated by the beautiful make-up and costumes of the performers.

She pursues her interest through lessons, which she has done since 2005. Her Down's syndrome has not stopped her from learning and working with a number of famous Cantonese opera teachers and performing on stage.

"Actually, I find it very relaxing performing on stage because I really enjoy it. I like wearing the costumes, headdresses and the make-up. It is very pretty," the 40-year-old performer says.

Down's syndrome is a genetic condition caused by a complete or partial third copy of chromosome 21 in the cells of a human body.

The condition results in characteristic facial features, physical growth delays and some intellectual disabilities.

Chan is one of 12 people with

Down's syndrome who were photographed for an exhibition that aims to raise awareness of the condition and showcase their otherwise unknown abilities and aspirations.

The roles that those photographed dream of performing include a director, artist, baker and kung fu master.

The exhibition, titled "With a Little Something Extra", was organised by the University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Down Syndrome Association (HKDSA) and art gallery founder Bosco Hong, and features 11 portraits

taken by photographer Victoria Tang-Owen.

Tang-Owen and the HKDSA worked to highlight the broad range of interests and ages of people with Down's syndrome, with the youngest person photographed being eight years old and the oldest over 40.

"When you blow up their photos, people can come face-to-face with people with Down's syndrome. That's the impact I want," Tang-Owen says.

"In Hong Kong, there are not too many opportunities for people with Down's syndrome,

especially with jobs. Not too many business owners are willing to hire them as they might not want to deal with it, or they are just not aware. Once you interact with someone with Down's syndrome, you will know and understand, and I think the interaction will make you smile."

Tang-Owen says the photo shoots last year were a lot of fun.

"I want people to see the friendly faces that we see every day because all these members are positive people," she says.

"I think it is important just to expose their faces to society because they should not be hidden. People should be open, informed and well-educated on why there is Down's syndrome and how we can help not to eliminate the problem, but to communicate with them better and to offer them more opportunities like jobs.

"What I want is for people to leave the exhibition questioning society, and Hong Kong especially – whether that [be in relation] to disabled people or people with Down's syndrome."

"With a Little Something Extra", Ground Floor Gallery, Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU. Until November 6



Gigi Chan aspires to be a Cantonese opera singer. Photo: Xiaomei Chen