

O-level students' determination in face of physical adversity pays off

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SINGAPORE: A nerve-disorder affecting her muscle tissue meant that she took longer than most to complete her exam papers, and at times, she would fail to complete the papers even with additional time — which happened when she sat for the O-levels last year.

But St Margaret's Secondary school student Janessa Yu overcame the odds to score seven distinctions in the exams, [the results](#) of which were released on Monday (Jan 11).

Diagnosed with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease when she was five years old, Janessa suffers from muscle weakness and decreased muscles in her limbs, which can affect her balance when she walks or when she writes.

Her condition is rare here, so much so that she was initially diagnosed with cerebral palsy by doctors, and she was only correctly diagnosed after consulting doctors from the United States, said her mother, Mrs Lillian Yu, 56, a personal assistant.

To ensure her safety, her mother would accompany her to school every morning on public transport.

The school, too, assigned her a buddy to help her move between classes, and arranged for extra time for her to complete her exams.

Upon receiving her results on Monday, Janessa was visibly emotional, saying: "I'm just grateful for the help and understanding (my friends and teachers) have given me ... I would tell (future students) to do their best, so they don't live with any regrets."

Described as disciplined and motivated by her teachers, Janessa refused tuition, preferring to study on her own, earning her the Model Learner Award throughout her four years at St Margaret's.

Her co-form teacher Shamini Rajandran said Janessa was also adamant about being treated as normally as possible. "We would ask her if she wanted an extra chair in (assembly), or ask if she was okay in class ... But she didn't want to be fussed over, she always said that it was okay," she said.

She was also undaunted by her Community Involvement Programme requirements, which included her packing Chinese New Year goodies for residents in Ghim Moh last year and delivering them. "Just seeing the residents' smiles was worth all the effort," she said.