

Coping with my son's suicide

BY JANICE TEO

Heartbreak tastes like dust. For weeks after the suicide of her son Zen in September 2018 - a month before his 18th birthday - Elaine Lek says everything she put in her mouth felt like ash.

Heartbreak feels like an Arctic wind. Elaine was constantly cold and needed jackets even in sunny Singapore to stop shivering. Heartbreak is an angry rash, panic attacks and heart palpitations. Elaine had them all - a condition medically recognised as Broken Heart Syndrome.

It has been almost three years since Zen took his own life in Melbourne, where he was studying. That fateful night, Elaine - the Chief Operating Officer of a luxury tableware company in Singapore - had flown in to visit him.

Zen seemed in good spirits as he kissed his mum goodnight at 9pm on September 27. Five hours later, he was in hospital fighting for his life. Three days later, he was dead.

The teenager had not had any history of mental challenges, but midway through college, when he was 17, he became distressed by persistent bullying at school.

His parents found scalpel blades in his room and discovered he had been cutting himself. Callous schoolmates nicknamed him 'barcode boy' because of the cut lines on his arms.

His parents took him out of

that toxic environment and sent him to Trinity College in Melbourne, where he settled in well.

But his mental health challenges lingered and he was prescribed an anti-depressant during a holiday in Singapore in September 2018. When the doctor quadrupled his dosage after only a week, Elaine was alarmed but was told insomnia and loss of appetite were the only side effects.

However, according to health authorities in the US, the drug Zen was prescribed had 'a possible increased risk of suicidal thoughts in some children, adolescents and young adults'.

Elaine believes it was this new drug that sent Zen over the edge. He began behaving erratically when he returned



Above: The Koh family: Max, Say Kiong, Elaine and Zen.

Left: Zen Dylan with the cheeky grin his family remembers well.

Inset: Some of the final sad text messages that Zen sent to his friends.



Above: A painting given to the family to comfort them, depicting Jesus now standing between the living and the dead.

Together with other mothers who have lost children to suicide, she co-founded PleaseStay. Movement, which

works to raise awareness about and prevent youth suicide in Singapore.

In 2019, Elaine and her husband Say Kiong Koh established The Zen Dylan

Koh Fund to support youth who need therapy, especially those who struggle to find help or cannot afford private therapy.

The fund has already helped more than 20 youths. Case-workers have stopped several from attempting suicide.

The wounds of her loss, while not as raw as they used to be, still ache. It is at those times she says she clings to these verses:

"Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you" - 1 Peter 5: 7; and "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." - Matthew 5: 4.

to Melbourne, ignored his parents' texts and bought a rope from a hardware store.

At the hospital, Elaine cradled her son as she said goodbye. Choking back her tears, she tells *Challenge*: "Tears were rolling down his cheeks and that night, he was brain dead."

Grief-stricken as they were, the family decided to donate Zen's organs - seven people in Melbourne were given a new lease of life.

After that terrible night, Elaine tried to find solace in her Buddhist upbringing but says the temple monk offered scant comfort.

"I had so many questions but the monk couldn't answer any of them," she shares. "He only told me Zen will be reincarnated if he lived a good life. I couldn't fathom that. Did that mean I would never see him again? Never be reunited with my family?"

"I followed the Buddhist last rites. I chanted for 49 days to give him a better rebirth, I went vegetarian to gain more merit for him, but none of that comforted me."

Then one day she found a Bible in Zen's room. She began reading it out of curiosity and found it offered exactly what she needed. "The more I learned about the Christian faith the more I wanted to know," she enthuses. "It gave me the comfort I craved."

She began going to church, where she says she learned "we have a loving, compassionate and forgiving God who loves us so much that He died for us on the cross to offer us the hope of eternal life."

"I know now we have a definite hope of a beautiful afterlife where Jesus will wipe away our pain, sorrows and tears and we can look forward to being reunited with our dear ones. I'm not afraid of death anymore because I know it's not the end."

Told by well-meaning friends suicide is the "unforgivable sin", Elaine's response is that it is in fact the result of mental illness. "It's like any other critical illness," she maintains. "Why would Jesus, who has forgiven us of all sin, not be compassionate to people who are in so much emotional pain?"

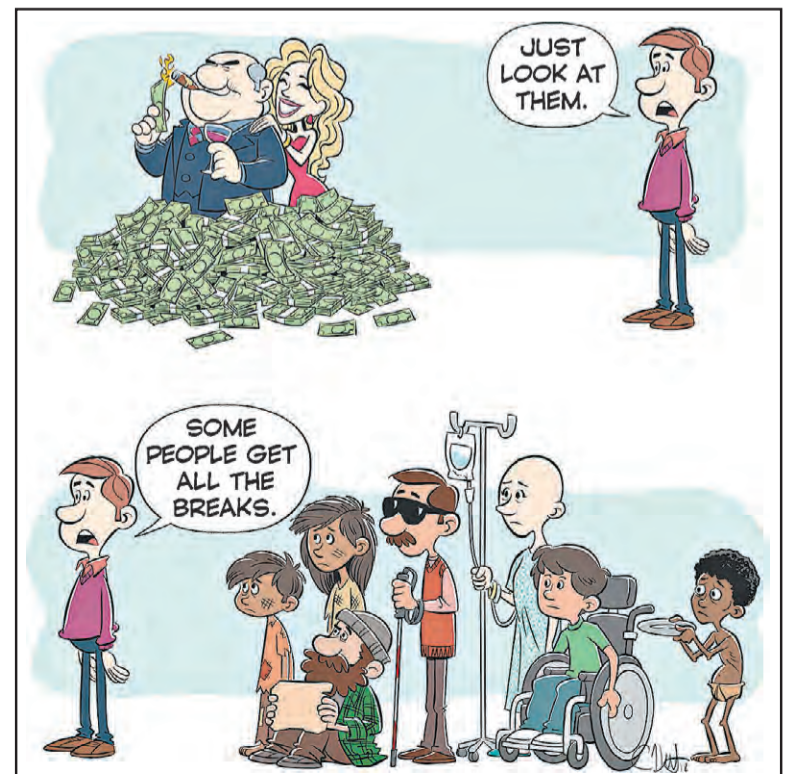
She committed her life to Christ and was baptised last year. "In Jesus I have found peace and hope and meaning. I no longer chase secular goals. I've surrendered my

anxieties to Jesus and trust He will provide. I no longer have to worry.

"My paradigm has shifted. I used to be very impatient and found it hard to forgive, but now I have peace."

Although she believes the psychiatrist was at fault - "he quadrupled his dosage within 10 days and I lost Zen within three weeks" - she has forgiven him.

"I was advised to take action, but preferred to put my resources into saving another child."





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