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**Giving them a voice:** 'The magazine has a definite objective of providing a platform for PWDs who can write,' says Mary Chen, founder and editor of *Challenges* magazine.

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## **A disability lifestyle magazine provides a platform for change for persons with disabilities.**

**By WONG LI ZA**

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**W**HEN Mary Chen first suggested starting up a disability magazine, she faced a lot of scepticism. A friend even told her she was crazy to do it. "She said that starting up a new publication was tough enough, what more such a niche magazine," recalled Chen, 48.

That was more than a year ago. Today, the bi-monthly magazine is still on the racks of major bookstores and enjoys a subscription base of about 300.

The inaugural issue of *Challenges* was launched on April 8 last year, coincidentally on the day Malaysia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The country's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 also came into force last July.

*Challenges* is Malaysia's first cross-disability lifestyle magazine for people with disability and those involved with it.

The idea for the magazine surfaced during a local disability network discussion held after celebrating the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in December 2006.

Being a magazine on disability, all its contributors are persons with disabilities (PWDs) such as blindness, brittle bones, athetoid cerebral palsy and those who are wheelchair-bound. *Challenges'* graphic designer, a graduate from a private college, is deaf.

"The magazine has a definite objective of providing a platform for PWDs who can write. That way, we are also training self-advocates," said Chen, the editor.

Last year, writer James Chua won the 2008 Mercedes Benz Red Ribbon National Media Award in Journalism (English print magazine category) for his article on HIV/AIDS. Chua was born with sight and hearing impairment.

"When James won the award, it was a great feeling for me, especially since he was the first (partially) blind and deaf person to win a

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media award. That sends the message that PWDs have equal opportunity to be journalists," said Chen.

The magazine also acts as a network between PWDs and corporations in facilitating job placements.

"We train PWDs at our magazine, such as telemarketers, before placing them with other companies like call centres."

*Challenges* focuses on three crux issues – prevention, management and living with disabilities. It aims to create awareness and an environment of collaborative networks and

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activities to promote independence and proactive integration of Malaysians with disabilities within their communities.

"Before starting the magazine, I was involved in a pre-vocational training programme for special needs students in my son William's school and realised that different NGOs were providing the same vocational skills.

"It was then that I felt we really needed a better network and collaboration for more effective use of resources, and the magazine was one such platform," said Chen, whose older son Alex, 25, is a pharmacist.

(Coincidentally, William suffers from Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic condition involving a chromosomal disorder which causes medical, developmental and learning problems.)

The magazine also promotes the concept of "parallel lifestyles" for PWDs in their communities, which means equal rights and access to enjoy the same lifestyle as everybody else.

*Challenges* also hopes to promote a positive image of PWDs and help equip them with pertinent skills for career advancement.

Readers of the magazine will find articles about disabled-friendly projects or efforts by colleges and corporations. There are also touching anecdotes of how PWDs overcome daily tasks that able-bodied people take for granted, like going to the mall for a drink or buying groceries.

Stories about PWDs who rise above the odds and make an impact on society inspire and give hope.

In a past issue, one reads about Dutch national Lydia la Riviere Zijdel, the highest ranking wheelchair martial artist in the world who has been teaching self-defence, empowerment and mobility to over 7,000 disabled girls and women for 20 years.

At present, the magazine's subscribers include individuals, colleges, hospitals, state agencies, and welfare and labour departments.

Chen said her team is constantly looking to increase subscription base and get more advertisements.

"Malaysians with disabilities are estimated at about 2.6 million but they do not stand alone, as they are supported by family members.

"In addition, one in seven Malaysians has a chronic disease which can lead to disabling

complications such as amputation or eyesight problems," said Chen, who was a freelance writer for 15 years and contributed to major English newspapers, magazines, corporate publications and online media.

*Challenges* got off the ground with initial funding from the Tourism Ministry.

Why that particular ministry, one might

ask.

"Travellers with disabilities form a huge, potential market. An estimated 10% of the world's population, or 650 million people, have some form of disability.

"Many PWDs are able to pay for their travels but are limited by lack of accessibility and facilities. Accessible tourism and health tourism will benefit the country. If we have more tourists with disabilities visiting the country, service providers will improve their services, which will benefit local PWDs," explained Chen.

She added that three pressing disability issues are access to good public transport and employment, education for PWDs and changing public mindset towards PWDs.

Chen highlighted that the Uniform Building By-Laws 1991 stipulate that all new public buildings must be accessible to the disabled and have facilities designed for their use. Existing buildings that do not have such facilities are given a certain time frame to comply.

"Schools should be the first to have wheelchair-friendly facilities but many do not," she said.

The stigma of treating PWDs like charity is also prevalent.

"Persons with disabilities do not need handouts, just a helping hand," stressed Chen.

Overall, she said the first thing that has to happen is to foster a better understanding of the needs of the disabled.

"Walking in a mall is so easy for us but if you are blindfolded or in a wheelchair, everything changes. That's what the blind and the wheelchair-bound experience," she said.

Having been editor of the magazine for over a year, Chen has met many inspiring individuals.

"I'm always amazed by the people I meet. I call them the everyday heroes. There is one girl with rheumathoid arthritis and lupus who is an occupational therapist and she told me her pain helps her understand her clients better."

In future, Chen hopes to publish the magazine in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil, plus Braille for the benefit of the blind.

Chen's ultimate aim may sound simple but is significant nonetheless.

"Our aim is to train PWDs to run their own magazine. When that day comes, I think I've done my part and they will have their own media by PWDs, for PWDs," she said.

■ *Challenges* retails for RM12 and is available at major bookstores and via subscription. For more information, to subscribe to the magazine or send a gift subscription, call ☎ 03-7804 0639, e-mail [mail@challengesmag.com](mailto:mail@challengesmag.com) or go to [challengesmag.com](http://challengesmag.com).