

Pint-sized and light as a feather, Miss Isabelle Lim looks much younger than her 20 years.

Diagnosed from birth with a rare condition called Nager syndrome, she has an underdeveloped face, hands and arms.

As a result, she is deaf and relies on sign language to communicate.

But her small size belies her resilience and ambition.

The first-year student at Lasalle College of the Arts hopes to become an outstanding photographer one day.

And she may well be on her way to realising her dream. She clinched the Lasalle Dare To Dream Scholarship two months ago, which is awarded to students with special needs.

Miss Lim, who is pursuing a diploma in fine arts, is the first recipient of the scholarship.

Her interest in photography began in primary school, when she became fascinated by how pictures were captured by a teacher's camera.

She started taking pictures with a regular point-and-shoot camera before upgrading to a DSLR camera, a present from an uncle.

Standing at just 148cm, she admits that her height poses some problems when she wants to get a shot.

Her condition also prevents her from fully extending her elbow.

Speaking to The New Paper through her mother, housewife Jacqueline Lim, 49, the bubbly girl said: "The DSLR camera was the best present ever. It made my passion stronger and convinced me that photography is what I love."

Miss Lim carries her bulky camera everywhere despite her size. Her favourite subject is the elderly.

"I can't explain why, but I like their expressions. I can sense their emotions, and it is interesting to me," she said.

Miss Lim almost took the accountancy path.

O LEVELS

After completing her O levels at Balestier Hill Secondary School, a mainstream school for hearing-impaired students, she continued her education at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), studying accountancy.

She applied for Lasalle after she did not qualify for accountancy in polytechnic.

"Accountancy is not my cup of tea, and it is hard to do well in something when you don't like it.

"But I had limited options because accountancy was the easiest route to find a job. In the deaf community, it is often hard to find a job because of the communication barrier and low education as it is difficult to progress academically."

Nonetheless, Miss Lim is now thriving in her new environment at Lasalle.

Said Diploma Level 1 programme lecturer Sawn Hwang: "Isabelle has in-



TNP PHOTO: LATASHNI GOBI NATHAN

She shoots for her dream

Student gets Lasalle special-needs scholarship

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tegrated well into the Diploma Level 1 programme, and is a friendly, well-liked member of the cohort.

"We are very pleased with her attitude, diligence and progress, and there is every indication that she will continue to do well in her pursuits at Lasalle."

At Lasalle, Miss Lim relies on an interpreter who sits in with her during her classes to help her understand the lessons. Sometimes, her mother, who has learnt sign language, attends classes with her.

STRUGGLED

In her first year at the ITE, she did not have an interpreter to help her and struggled through that year.

"It was a tough year because it was the first time in my life that I did not have an interpreter in school," she said.

"I had to rely on the visuals and try to understand what was on the board or screen."

In her next two years at the ITE, the Singapore Association for the Deaf provided an interpreter for a fee.

The Lims estimate that they spend at least \$2,000 a year on interpretation services for Miss Lim.

Miss Lim's parents are grateful for the opportunity that Lasalle has provided for their daughter.

'SHE HAS BEEN A VERY BRAVE CHILD'

Nager Syndrome is a rare genetic condition which results in physical defects.

There have been fewer than 200 documented cases of the syndrome worldwide, according to the Foundation for Nager & Miller Syndromes.

Miss Isabelle Lim, 20, was hospitalised for eight months when she was born because she had problems eating and breathing without a tube. This is because children born with Nager Syndrome have an opening in their mouth called a cleft palate and a narrow airway.

Miss Lim had to sleep with a continuous positive airway pressure machine before she went through a surgical procedure when she was 11.

Her first procedure to correct her airways took place when she was two.

Miss Lim was tube-fed till she was eight and her diet consisted of milk and plain porridge.

It was only when she was

in Secondary 1 that she tried her first plate of chicken rice. She was hooked.

"I feel like I can eat chicken rice every day for the rest of my life," said Miss Lim excitedly.

Children with Nager Syndrome often have upper limb defects such as underdeveloped thumbs.

When Miss Lim was four, she went through an operation to attach her index finger to her thumb.

Her parents recalled that it was a frustrating time for the young Miss Lim because she could not communicate in sign language with her heavily bandaged hands.

"She has been a very brave child and never gave us a hard time although it (the operations) could have been traumatic.

"The first few years were challenging. But we decided on the day she was born that we would love her for who she is, and raise her as best as we can," said her father, Mr Nick Lim.



'WELL-LIKED':
Miss Isabelle Lim with lecturers David Chan (far left) and Sawn Hwang.

PHOTO: LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

Her father, insurance agent Nick Lim, 64, said: "The lecturers and students have been understanding and open to help her. The environment was very supportive of a child who is deaf."

Miss Lim jokes that she wants to be a wedding photographer because she "likes romance".

"I'm worried that I'll miss the kiss though. So now I just hope to be a good photographer in any area. Except war zones."