



Above: Dr Aqilah Faaiah Haji Shamsuri on her wedding day in 2021 with her mother. She tied the knot with her then boyfriend of two years in Singapore General Hospital, where her mother was hospitalised. One of her mother's last wishes was to see her get married. Her mother died a week later. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF AQILAH FAAIAH HAJI SHAMSURI, NUS

EMBRACING ADVERSITY

When I look at my mother, she didn't think that life was so unfair. She looked at every life challenge as more of a test of character.



DR AQILAH FAAIAH HAJI SHAMSURI (right)



NUS medical student cared for terminally ill mum while studying

She graduates from NUS after taking year off to care for mum with ovarian cancer

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One of her late mother's last wishes was to see her get married.

So in 2021, at the age of 25, Dr Aqilah Faaiah Haji Shamsuri and her then boyfriend of two years tied the knot in Singapore General Hospital, where her mother was hospitalised, in the presence of their immediate families.

Her mother, Madam Rahana Ali, who was battling late-stage ovarian cancer, died a week later.

"She was such a fighter. You would never think she was a dying woman. She was fighting for me. She wanted to see me graduate, get married and have children," said Dr Aqilah, who is an only child.

But Dr Aqilah, who graduated on Saturday from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine in the National University of Singapore (NUS), knew better.

"I had to have that conversation with her to manage her expectations because I think through it all, she felt like she was going to get through it and go home soon. And that was the hope of the family as well," she said.

As the main caregiver, Dr Aqilah spent hours studying beside her mother's hospital bed during her last days, which coincided with final exams in her fourth year.

The journey to entering medical school was also a tumultuous one, as it was during her last year in Republic Polytechnic's biomedical science course in 2016 that her mother received the cancer diagnosis.

"She had symptoms of anaemia,

essentially getting more tired and breathless... Unfortunately, the cancer she had presents very late in patients," said Dr Aqilah, who juggled studies with caregiving for her mother, who went through surgery and several rounds of chemotherapy.

Her father was working then as a private-hire driver to support the family financially.

Being accepted into medical school felt "surreal", said Dr Aqilah, who attained a near-perfect grade point average (GPA) of 3.98 out of 4 for her diploma. "I felt like I couldn't do what I thought was my best. The fact that I still got in was like a shock for all of us; I thought I had to get a perfect GPA to get in."

In her second year of medical school, her mother suffered end-stage kidney failure and had to undergo dialysis three times a week.

A few months later, the family was told her mother's cancer had returned.

"That was the first time I saw my mum not really want to fight on so much," said Dr Aqilah.

"At the back of my mind as I was going through medical school, I knew my mother might not see me graduate," said Dr Aqilah.

A staycation to celebrate her mother's birthday ended up in the hospital, where her mother experienced pain so severe she was in tears throughout the night.

NUS supported Dr Aqilah by changing her clinical postings to the hospital that her mother was hospitalised in, so that she could check in on her regularly.

A subsidy from Mendaki and other scholarships covered her tuition fees and other expenses entirely.

She took a gap year from school in 2021 to look after her mother, who died in the same year. In honour of her mother, she named her online baking business "Ibu Roti" – Ibu means mother in Malay.

Because of her experience, palliative care is a field Dr Aqilah has an interest in.

"As a caregiver, I realised what kind of doctor a patient as well as the family want – someone who takes the time to not just treat the disease itself, but look at the patient holistically," she said.

The ordeal also made her stronger, she said. "When I look at my mother, she didn't think that life was so unfair. She looked at every life challenge as more of a test of character."

"There's always a silver lining. When adversity happens, there's always a rainbow at the end of it."

PURSUE HER MEDICINE AND RESEARCH DREAM

Another person who benefited from her time in NUS is Dr Doreen Goh.

As a secondary school student, Dr Goh thought she would eventually become a researcher, but she changed her mind after a six-month stint as a clinic assistant.

"It cemented the fact that I enjoy solving problems not just in the vacuum of a lab, but for people. So that made me choose medicine," she said.

"But ultimately, medicine will never progress without the kind of research that a lot of the basic sciences are doing."

So a new programme offered by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, allowing students to study for a master's degree on top of their medical qualification, was a dream come true for Dr Goh.

On Saturday, the 24-year-old became the first NUS Medicine graduate to receive both the Bach-



Dr Doreen Goh is the first NUS Medicine graduate to receive both the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) and Master of Science (Research). PHOTO: COURTESY OF DOREEN GOH

elor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) and Master of Science (Research). She was the only one in her batch of over 300 students who was admitted into the programme.

Under the MBBS Intercollegiate Year Programme (IYP), which was announced in 2020, students take one year off to pursue another area of study, before returning to complete their medical studies.

NUS Medicine had said previously that the aim was to widen students' learning experience and provide them with additional knowledge and skills they may need in complex environments as doctors.

A spokesman said it will introduce another option of a Master of Science in Biomedical Informatics in the next academic year of 2024/2025.

Said Dr Goh, who signed up for science mentorship programmes when she was in secondary school

and junior college: "Research is really about problem-solving and asking the right questions, whereas a lot of us in the education system in general focus on trying to find the right answer."

As part of the IYP, she worked under Emeritus Professor Lee Eng Hin and Dr Yang Zheng, a senior research fellow, to study cartilage regeneration after injury.

"I would look for my supervisors if I had questions or problems, but they really trusted me to run as much of the project as possible," she said.

Research taught her resilience, she said.

"You really need to be very comfortable with things not going the way you expected them to."

"The fundamental skill of solving problems is also something that you will need wherever you go."

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