

Summary: Life of Adam Chang

Maria Chen

Shanbin Adam Chang was born on August 21, 1985 into an extended family: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and his sister Amy. His earlobes were so big that they were folded over, a very auspicious sign. He was an easy baby. We all flew to Taiwan when Adam was one month old. He ate well, slept well and never made a fuss during a fifteen-hour flight. He was also a very happy baby and smiled all the time. One day he started laughing whenever his father smacked both lips together to make a "mao" sound. That was when we started calling him "Mao-er," (which means fuzzy hair.) We did it to make him laugh.

Adam's affinity to music and arts was evident long before he learned to talk. Sitting on a high chair, he would kick his legs to mark the beat of whatever nursery song we happened to be playing. If it was something he liked, he would sing the last note of every phrase. As soon as he could crawl, it became obvious he thought of the waste basket as a treasure trove. He would fish things out one by one and spend hours playing with them. Soon he learned to create collages from bits and pieces of junk. He kept up this hobby until he was ready for school.

Adam had many interests: dance lessons at 4, violin lessons at 5, arts & craft at 6, and onto piano, kungfu, drums, gymnastics, swimming, etc. He could pick things up with relative ease: using chopsticks, tying shoes, riding the bicycles, song and dance, any sports, and so on. The only thing he didn't like was school. He didn't like studying Chinese, either. He was good with his hands, but talking wasn't his strongest suit. When Adam started talking, for a while only his sister Amy could understand what he was saying. His grades in the Chinese school were just average, but his calligraphy was very impressive and had won him many awards.

As parents, we grew alarmed when Adam became less and less happy about school, so much so that he had trouble getting up in the morning on a school day. We started looking for alternatives, finally deciding on the Harker School, largely impressed by their strong offerings in art classes. Adam started at Harker as a fifth grader and spent a few happy years all through junior high, enjoying its nurturing environment for his artistic talents but receiving little academic pressure from the teachers.

The turning point for Adam was when he started at Saratoga High. Moving back into the "easier" public school system, he could spend even less time on the academics and therefore got to devote his energy to pursue a wide variety of interests such as art, music, cooking and sports. Thus, in a few years Adam was transformed from a grumpy little boy who hated school to a happy, sociable section lead at the school orchestra. As parents we were very grateful for the teachers from Saratoga High, particularly Mr. Boitz at the music department.

At the end of the freshman year, Adam made up his mind to go to art school in lieu of regular college. His father had a long talk with him, and Adam was very persuasive. We decided to support his goal as best we can. In addition to going to summer schools at the Academy of Arts in San Francisco and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Adam would spend his Sundays pursuing his interests and honing his skills under the tutelage of Mr. Baoping Chen, who drove all the way from San Francisco for Adam's private lessons. These were among Adam's happiest moments. By his junior year Adam had assembled an impressive portfolio, and was finally accepted at RISD, his dream school. He was very happy and well respected during the college years. Most importantly, he was competitive and worked extremely hard. There was no longer any trace of the lazy student who hated doing homework.

Adam's growth came in leaps and bounds. He was always a sensible and sensitive child, but when he came home for the summer after spending a year at RISD, he was mature beyond his years. Out of the 24 years Adam was with us, his father was ill for about 18 years. Gradually, he lost the ability to walk, then he had to move from a manual wheelchair to a power chair, then he had to get a morphine pump implant and lost the ability to read and write. His father's slow, excruciating decline must have hurt Adam deeply. Whenever he was home, Adam would do his best to help out. The summer after his freshman year he remodeled the living room. The summer after the sophomore year he helped me start my company, the Loan Story--from picking an office, negotiating the lease, designing the company logo, stationeries, as well as the office space, picking the furniture, decorating the walls. He was the son who took over his father's duties, and his unwavering support not only eased my sense of loneliness, but helped me find some inner strength to go on. We did not talk every day, but there is nothing we cannot share.

Adam started working as an intern in New York by the junior summer. He was with his sweetheart Katie, and called home frequently to share all sorts of funny or weird stories. After graduation, he accompanied me to a tour of Japan before starting work at New York. The next summer, Adam's younger sister Adela was going to Cambridge, England for the summer. So Adam took two weeks off to travel with us from Scotland, to Lake District, Wales, London and Cambridge. July of 2009 he already knew about the tumor in his pancreas. But he still insisted Adela to pursue her plan of studying Japanese at a language school in Tokyo. He even drove her to the airport. It was close to Christmas when Adela came back from Japan. Adam already had some physical discomfort, but was pretty much his old, happy self in every regard. All in all, Adam's courage, as well as his consideration for other people, never wavered. I was not only grateful, I was lost in admiration.

We Chinese often say the parental debt isn't something you can completely pay back. As Adam's parent, I feel quite the opposite. This child was sent to me as my teacher, my guru, my guide. Adam's integrity was impeccable. Once, upon learning his peers having stolen a carton of hotdogs from an unsuspecting street vendor, he tried to talk some sense into them. When they wouldn't listen, Adam refused to hang out with them and walked back to his dorm. He was considerate and soft-spoken. He would point out my shortcomings from time to time. He noticed people in need and was always quietly

helping out. He was respectful of his elders, a good friend to his peers, and protective of the young. He was never too busy to pause and pet a dog he saw in the street.

In short, Adam made me a better person. I would like to urge all parents to see your own child with a fresh pair of eyes. Look inward. Your child is like a mirror. If you know what to look for, your child could be the best teacher you can have. Adam lived for 24 years. During these 24 years he brought happiness to a lot of people: relatives, friends, even casual acquaintances. He was quick, witty, considerate, at ease with himself. He had a real style. His presence was a constant reminder of the *joie de vivre*. The bar he had set for the rest of us was high indeed. May we all live the rest of our lives the best we could, so that we can catch up with him, one day.