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FUN SOCCER ON THE TURF

LOVE SOCCER –
CHEUNG SAU LAN SHERRY

A MOTHER'S PROMISE

“This is a project all about love. Without love, it wouldn't have happened,” said Sherry Cheung. She shares the same feeling with all parents who stand outside a soccer field. Five years ago, she brought her three-year-old son to a famous local soccer school, but the coach only favoured the gifted children, and her son was invisible to the coach even after a year of training. “The coach didn't know his name. In a soccer game, he was one of the few students who were not given a chance to play, so we left,” Sherry said. Like other mothers, Sherry only wanted her child to have fun playing soccer. However, the aims of most training schools seem to be more complicated. “I promised my son to let him play soccer. I thought, why not find a dozen children who want to play soccer, and then book a soccer field and hire a coach myself? It shouldn't be too complicated. Soon, the number of children increased from twenty or so to more than six hundred,” said Sherry nonchalantly.

As words about her self-organised soccer class got out, the number of participants

grew. One day, a newcomer held Sherry's hand and led her to the side of the soccer field. They pointed at a fan blade and asked, “What is this?” “This is an electric fan,” Sherry answered. During the rest of the class, this child asked the same question 40 times, and Sherry answered them 40 times.

“I was curious and thought the child was special, so I did some research and consulted some professionals. The conclusion was that the child might be autistic.”

“The ball is round.” — this famous quote means that anything is possible. When an autistic child gets a soccer ball, would you grab it from them, or play a soccer game with them? “Love” is immeasurable, and so are the possibilities motivated by love.



“WE HAVE NO AUTISTIC STUDENTS.”

It was the first time Sherry had met an autistic child. She found that despite having difficulty in concentrating and socialising and being unusually sensitive, these children were very capable. “I don’t see autism as an illness. They can achieve more than what we imagine. But I discovered that some parents might think that they can’t do anything.” Since the aim of soccer is only to kick the ball into the goal, repeatedly practising the motion allows them to concentrate and gives them a sense of achievement. “Once, a mother approached me in the third lesson and asked: ‘Could I get another set of uniform? My son has been refusing to take it off after the first lesson.’ Apparently, her son was praised by the coach during the lesson and it made him very happy,” Sherry laughed.

The soccer field removes all labels. The children all wear the same set of uniform and share the same goal. They need to follow the coach’s instructions and collaborate with each other, which enhances their social skills and confidence. The success of Sherry’s project was evident, yet she found it hard to identify and help more children

in need through contacting schools and organisations. “Even if you extend a helping hand, other people might not take it. I’ve had frustrating times. We contacted many NGOs and schools. One primary school principal even told us, ‘We have no autistic students.’ I didn’t believe them,” Sherry said firmly.

Facing repeated rejection, Sherry realised that the cause of society ignoring problems is the existing systems. “Every organisation has a service target which affects the budget. Therefore, to make sure the target is met, they become conservative to avoid losing their service audience.” The reputation of schools and the survival of NGOs are a tall wall separating hidden autistic children, making them lose opportunities for diverse learning. Despite facing the deep-seated problem, Sherry’s target became more focused.

“When I learnt about it, I felt dejected, and then I carried on. I believe everything is challenging. Instead of giving up easily, I asked myself why I started the project. I don’t have any numbers to meet, so I’ll just give my best effort.”



AN EDUCATION FOR PARENTS

Shouldering the roles of a mother, a soccer school principal, and the head of an advertising company, Sherry confessed that she spends 70% of her time on the soccer school. Despite her wholehearted effort to help autistic kids, the role of their parents is still essential. “Parenting is very important. We met a mother who found out about her son’s autism and decided to quit her job to take care of him full-time. Later, he successfully entered a good school. On the other hand, some parents choose to hide the fact and keep their children at home. They also tend to be picky when their children first join the lessons.” The children do not know how to protect themselves, while the parents build layers of defence. Parents have

a lot of questions when their children first join the lessons, as they are worried about discrimination. Facing the “poker faces” of these parents, Sherry tries to be understanding.

“They are all loving parents. Their defensiveness may be due to bad experiences elsewhere. After a few lessons with us, they become more relaxed;”

Sherry smiled.

The project started because of a mother’s wish to give her son a fair chance of learning, and this has since been the soccer school’s purpose. Sherry believes that the project has managed to come

so far all because of the love and perseverance of her companions. “What I treasure the most is the relationship with the kids and the changes in the parents. Despite all the hardship we have gone through, I’m encouraged by the participation of so many supportive companions — we’ve got social workers privately referring parents to the soccer school and organisations continuously supporting us. These are all little things that drive us forwards.

”Under the cold weather warning, we stepped onto the roof of an international school. Dozens of children in jerseys were practising shooting and passing a ball. Parents stood outside the field in

the cold wind, but their children’s smiles after successful shots put a warm feeling in their hearts, almost like having a sip of sweet hot chocolate.