

# She's 38 and she's going to school for the first time — art school



Picture/ SAM YEO

By JILL LIM

MS Mary Kaw Lian Geok is overjoyed.

The 38-year-old wheelchair-bound woman has just been given a chance to develop her talent.

Ms Kaw, who has spinal muscular dystrophy, will be going to the school of her dreams — art school.

Another artist, also physically handicapped, has offered to pay for her part-time course there. (See report below.)

Explained Mr Greg Burns, 40, whose work is now on show: "I just felt I... want to give someone else a break."

Ms Kaw would not have been able to afford the course on her own. She was nominated by Very Special Arts, a charity helping disabled people to study or be exposed to art.

Ms Kaw got the illness when she was two years old. It made her unable to walk. Her right arm is also weak.

From the age of seven, she has been living at the Singapore Cheshire Home.

She said: "In the home we do learn some things like handicraft. But I've never been to school. This is the

first time I will be studying."

She spoke dialects at home and learned some English from radio and television.

Drawing is something she has been interested in since she was a child. She learned painting about nine years ago, from a teacher who visited the home.

"I like watercolours. I don't leave the home to paint, I usually do still-life, flowers or fruits. I've always wanted to study painting.

"I was told about a month ago I might get to study here. I was so happy. I really want to go for my dreams."

Ms Kaw, who married another Singapore Cheshire Home resident in 1986, will be doing a part-time certificate course in Western Art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa). It costs about \$2,000.

She is to attend classes once a week for two years.

She said: "My husband also feels very excited for me."

She was at Nafa's Middle Road campus yesterday to take a look.

She found she could manage quite well with her motorised wheelchair.

Now she's just waiting to make new friends.

**Dream come true:** Mr Burns met Ms Kaw at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) yesterday to make sure it would be easy for her to get around the campus.

## SHOW INFO

**WHAT:** Portals, exhibition of Mr Burns' work  
**WHERE:** Four Seasons Hotel  
**WHEN:** Until Feb 15, 10.30 am to 6.30 pm (Mon to Sat) and noon to 5 pm (Sun)

## ARTIST HAS A 'CAN DO' ATTITUDE

HE treks, scuba dives, body surfs and holds four world swimming records. And now, Mr Greg Burns, who needs crutches to walk, has struck out as a full-time artist.

Part of the proceeds from his first show will pay for Ms Kaw's course.

Mr Burns, 40, got polio when he was 10 months old. But that hasn't stopped him from leading a full life.

"My mother always made sure I went to regular schools. In elementary school, the principal said: 'No, he can't come. There are all these steps.' So my mother and I

spent summer practising going up and down those steps."

Mr Burns has been in Singapore for two years and used to be a manager with PepsiCo Restaurants.

He won medals for swimming in the Paralympics, the Olympic games for physically handicapped people, in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996. He is also planning to go to Sydney for the 2000 Olympics.

Added Mr Burns: "Often society will say, you can't. Fortunately, I didn't hear or listen to society. I've always had a 'can do' attitude."