



National taekwondo athlete Diyanah Aqidah Muhammad Dian Khudhairi has grown closer to her father, Mr Muhammad Dian Khudhairi Mohamed Ali, since her mother's death in 2015. ST PHOTO: LIM YACHUI

Taekwondo champ flies high with father's emotional support



Stephanie Yeo
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National taekwondo athlete Diyanah Aqidah Muhammad Dian Khudhairi, 26, aims a series of flying kicks just in front of her father's face as the camera clicks.

Caught in mid-air, she seems to defy gravity.

Mr Muhammad Dian Khudhairi Mohamed Ali, 52, stands still, not flinching at all as she runs and leaps at him in another pose.

The football and silat player gamely poses as Diyanah choreographs yet another angle for the photo shoot.

"You need to teach me," he coaxes, as she tries to explain how she wants him to place his hands.

"This is the easiest one, papa," says Diyanah, who clinched silver and bronze medals at the 2023 SEA Games in Cambodia.

Their easy banter is a reflection of their close relationship. But it was not always like this.

Her parents' divorce when she was aged six and her brother just a year younger meant Diyanah spent most of her childhood without her father.

After the split, her mother moved them into their maternal grandmother's flat in Sengkang, and Diyanah saw her father only during the occasional extended family gathering.

Thanks to his stern demeanor, she and her brother used to see their father as "a scary guy – whenever he comes, it means he will scold us".

Her mother later remarried and divorced again. Mr Dian also remarried when Diyanah was nine years old and has another son, now aged 16.

Meanwhile, Diyanah discovered a love for taekwondo when she entered Edgefield Secondary School, which required all its students to learn the martial art.

At age 13, she won her first gold medal in an inter-school competition and got hooked, giving up her drama club co-curricular activities to focus solely on taekwondo. By age 16, she made team captain.

She was just 16 when her mother, businesswoman Maslin Mashuri, then aged 40, suddenly died from an asthma attack in 2015, during one of the worst haze seasons that saw primary and secondary

schools closing for a day.

Her late mum had then been getting their new flat in Changi Village ready, while Diyanah and her brother were still living with their grandmother.

Diyanah recalls: "I didn't really feel that my world was gone, but I felt I had to take care of my brother because it was only us."

Since her brother chose to continue living with their maternal grandmother, Mr Dian says he did not want to separate the siblings and move Diyanah to his home in Tampines.

He started spending weekends with them instead, taking them out for meals or to hang out at his mother's home in Pasir Ris.

"I wanted to make them feel that I would always be around for them," says Mr Dian, a senior lab technician, who champions Diyanah to training sessions whenever he can.

"I told them if they have problems, I will listen."

Even though his role then involved work trips overseas, he made it a point to drive up to Kuala Lumpur with his mother and Diyanah's brother to see her compete in the 2017 SEA Games.

Besides giving her advice on her competitions, he supported her sporting endeavours financially, as Diyanah's sport involves numerous training sessions and competitions overseas. The Singapore Taekwondo Federation also partially supported Diyanah's training and overseas trips from 2017 to 2023, and she took on part-time coaching work for additional income from 2021.

She was awarded the Singapore

Sport Excellence Scholarship in 2024, which has eased the family's financial burden and allowed her to train for the 2025 SEA Games and 2026 Asian Games full time.

Diyanah will graduate with a degree in sports studies and marketing at NIM University later in 2025.

She admits it was initially "awkward" to have her father more present in her life.

"But because I don't have my mum, I thought, what if I lose my dad one day? So, I eventually tried to spend more time with my dad and my family," she says.

Having to train or compete overseas regularly has also taught her to treasure time with her loved ones.

Diyanah says she recognises how hard her father has worked to support his children and her dreams despite the upheavals they have gone through.

"I feel like he always keeps me in his prayers."

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If love is in the details, these three fathers love deeply.

Cancer survivor and single dad Ben Phua, 69, learnt to cook by trial and error so he could feed his 14-year-old son, who has special needs, nutritious meals.

Mr Steven Eng, 59, has been carrying his 37-year-old son, William, for decades as the younger man has muscular dystrophy, a condition that causes muscles to weaken over time.

Mr Muhammad Dian Khudhairi Mohamed Ali, 52, once drove to Kuala Lumpur to see his daughter, national taekwondo athlete Diyanah Aqidah Muhammad Dian Khudhairi, 26, in her first SEA Games in 2017, even though he was not sure if he could secure tickets to the match. Diyanah's mother had died two years earlier.

When adversity strikes, they rise to the challenge because their children mean the world to them. Read their inspiring stories this Father's Day.

Cancer survivor cares for special needs son full time

When Mr Ben Phua, 69, takes a bus with Zai Quan, 14, strangers sometimes compliment the boy's striking eyes and thick lashes.

"They say Zai Quan is so handsome and they ask, 'Is this your grandson?' I say, 'No, this is my son,'" he says.

The divorced retiree is the sole caregiver of his only child, who was born with an extra chromosome, resulting in multiple disabilities. While Zai Quan can walk, he is non-verbal and relies on his father for everyday activities.

Mr Phua never intended to get married, much less become a father. Looking for love was a luxury for the bachelor, who worked long hours as a building technician, among other roles. In his spare time, he upgraded himself through night classes at the former Vocational and Industrial Training Board.

At his mother's behest, he married a 26-year-old Chinese national in 2009 within weeks of being introduced to her. He was 53.

The couple were blindsided when their baby was born with special needs in November 2010, he says. The doctor had not alerted them to any abnormalities.

The stress of raising Zai Quan created a rift in their marriage and his former wife left their marital home several times over the years. Their divorce was finalised in May 2020 and Mr Phua had sole custody of their then 10-year-old son.

He quit his job as a mechanical and engineering site supervisor in the construction industry to take care of his son in late 2019. Six months later, he had to undergo surgery for Stage 2 prostate cancer.

Unhappy with his domestic helper's quarrelsome ways, he let her go in 2021 and took over caring for Zai Quan full time in their three-room flat in Ang Mo Kio.

Their daily routine is simple but stressful, Mr Phua says.

Zai Quan tends to wake up late if he has trouble sleeping. So, Mr Phua feeds the boy a cup of Milo in between getting him ready to board the school bus to Minds Fernvale Gardens School in the late morning.

If his son manages to wake up early, he reheats for him the food he cooked the previous night.

While Zai Quan is in school, Mr Phua does household chores, including washing clothes his son may have soiled, and makes dinner.

The self-taught cook says his early meals "cannot make it", but now, he knows his way around seasonings and considers his fried chicken and pork "quite tasty, very nice". He mashes his son's food by hand as he has no blender.

Once Zai Quan returns home in the late afternoon, it is time for him to eat and shower before being tucked into bed between 10pm and midnight.

Mr Phua says his movements have been slower since his hernia operation in 2023, making daily tasks a challenge.

During a particularly trying period two years ago, he had to postpone his operation as his son fell sick with flu and had to be hospitalised for two weeks.

Later, he scrambled to find a

place for Zai Quan to stay while he himself was admitted for his surgery, and was relieved when Assisi Hospice accepted the boy for about 90 days, especially since he had post-operation complications.

On some days, he admits, he just runs out of steam. "I fall asleep when I'm caregiving," he says. When he wakes up with a start, he rushes to bathe his son before his bedtime.

He relies on his Central Provident Fund retirement account savings to get by, as well as help from government initiatives such as ComCare, a social safety net for lower-income families, and social service agency Singapore Cancer Society, plus subsidies from various organisations.

The team from cancer non-profit 365 Cancer Prevention Society, which used to dispense financial assistance to Mr Phua, currently supports him and his son with home visits, texts and phone calls.

Father and son enjoy the occasional day out, thanks to activities organised by the cancer society and Club Rainbow, a charity that supports children with chronic illnesses. Mr Phua also looks forward to receiving vegetables and dry groceries every month from the residents' committee.

He says it is not easy to take care of a child with special needs, listing the never-ending inconveniences he has to bear, from cleaning faeces off clothing to keeping his temper in check when his son refuses to obey.

But when he is reading from a poster of fruits to Zai Quan for the photo shoot, he reveals a different side.

A big smile replaces his frown as he hugs his son. His voice softens. Zai Quan sits in rapt attention when his father talks to him, smiling and grunting. This means that he is happy, Mr Phua says.

If only he had the time to read to his son every day, he laments. There is just too much to do at home.

With the boy turning 15 in November and Mr Phua almost in his seventh decade, the issue of who will take care of his son weighs heavily on his mind. The second of four siblings, Mr Phua worries that Zai Quan will end up in a nursing home, where he will have no intellectual stimulation.

Turning to his son, he says: "Papa's last wish is to find a good home for you."

Stephanie Yeo



Mr Ben Phua wishes he had more time to read to his son Zai Quan, who has special needs. As the boy's sole caregiver, however, he has too many chores to manage every day. ST PHOTO: TATYIN NG

generation this last decade or so, and how they might have felt when we dismissed their gripes with our blunt retorts of "OK, boomer".

Especially because boomers are experiencing this same sea change too. And they are witnessing it through the same eyes that have also lived through the cultural shifts of the 1960s, Y2K and everything in between.

It is even more remarkable considering that my father grew up in a rural farm in India, playing in the dirt and as blissfully unaware of the wider world as his Singaporean counterparts in their kampongs.

In the 1950s, artificial intelligence was the province of speculative fiction, and barely anyone had access to computers. But in 2025, people are using ChatGPT for everything from doing their homework to designing workout regimens. Considering the extreme

societal shifts that have occurred in just a few decades, it is admirable how progressive my father is. He came of age when men were the strict, authoritarian figures of home and office, but he never expected his two daughters – my elder sister and me – to obediently fall into traditional gender roles.

Even as I felt obliged to follow the "practical" path of a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) vocation, it was my father who asked me why I was not instead pursuing journalism, a profession I had been more interested in since primary school.

When I struggled through my 20s to forge any semblance of a career, he would have been well within his rights to ask me just what his life plans or goals were, given that I was still living in his household, consuming groceries and electricity he was paying for. He never did. Instead, like many

Asian fathers, his love language is acts of service. He drove me to and from appointments, even though I have had my own driving licence for over a decade; he woke up in the middle of the night on multiple occasions to help me dispose of lizard invaders; he sent me information about the latest savings interest rate promotions. But time is a punishing master, and the boomer fathers of Singapore – many of whom continued as their families' de facto breadwinners, chauffeurs and handyman well after their prime years – are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, and facing the reality of their mortality.

My dad and his peers must now rely on their millennial children to fulfil these roles instead – a humbling experience given that they had been raised to be the protectors and providers of their households.

As we become the grumpy elder statesmen of society to the rising

Gen Z and Gen Alpha cohorts, maybe it is time for us millennials to extend some compassion and empathy to our fathers as they enter their twilight years.

Rather than being like the ancient Greek gods who summarily dismissed their patriarchs, maybe it is time to put away the eye roll when Dad scoffs at a werewolf's howl, and to graciously avoid muttering "OK, boomer" when he refuses to admit to his mistakes.

Perhaps this Father's Day, it is time to embrace him instead. Because I do know that while I may not be a daddy's girl, for better or worse, I will always be my father's daughter.

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■ Hear Me Out is a new series where young journalists (over)share on topics ranging from navigating friendships to self-loathing, and the occasional intrusive thought.



I am not, nor have I ever been, a daddy's girl. Quite the opposite, in fact, because my father and I have always had a spiky relationship. Do not get me wrong – I love me, and I love him. But loving

Time to embrace our grumpy boomer dads this Father's Day

someone and getting along with him or her are not the same thing, and our dynamic has been characterised by tension and disagreement more often than not.

Figuring out the "why" could probably fuel years of therapy. But in some ways, it is a tale as old as time, with the title of "Inter-generational Conflict". He is a boomer, she is a millennial – can they overcome their differences and get along as father and daughter?

Generational conflict is deeply woven into human consciousness.

In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus, the king of the gods, dethroned and imprisoned his father Kronos, the king of the Titans – who himself had castrated and killed his father, Uranus.

These tales embody the fact that generational conflicts are inevitable in a society where new generations continuously pop up to replace the old. But the millennial-boomer gap is particularly fraught, and has been the topic of many a think piece this past decade.

Baby boomers were born in the years immediately following



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

World War II, into a world that was full of hope and potential. They grew up amid the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Nation-building was the order of the day for many Asian countries that were now rid of colonial shackles, including not just Singapore but also India, where my father was born and raised before he immigrated here in the 1980s.

This climate shaped him and his fellow boomer men into fathers who were stoic, frugal and stubborn. While their wives cooked, cleaned and reared children, my dad and his boomer colleagues worked long days at the office so they could rise above their stations and take advantage of the abundance of career opportunities available to them.

In contrast, millennials like me grew up in the weird 1990s, obsessed with tie-dye and Beanie Babies plush toys. Life was comfortable, and the ravages of world wars were ancient history –

I personally was much more interested in the World Wide Web, and how it brought me closer to the exciting and intriguing world of Western pop culture.

Together with my peers, I matured into an adult who wanted more out of life than to just eat, sleep and work.

Or in the eyes of boomer fathers everywhere: We became lazy, entitled and mercurial procrastinators who would rather spend money enjoying an avocado toast than saving it for our future mortgages.

No wonder my dad and I have clashed so often – we approach life with two fundamentally incompatible philosophies and outlooks. Though it does not help, of course, that he is as stubborn as I am easily "triggered", to cite two other stereotypes of our respective generations.

But as I hit my late 30s, the millennial domination that I took for granted in my 20s and early

30s is fading. Gen Zs, who were born in the 2000s, and Gen Alphas, who were born in the 2010s, have become the cultural tastemakers or agenda-setters, in ways that make me feel old and weary. Skibidi? Gyat? It is all gibberish to me.

Adding insult to injury are the mocking memes of millennial cultural hallmarks by these Gen Z and Gen Alpha upstarts. Nothing is safe, from our penchant for ankle socks to the millennial pause, which is the brief pause that millennials tend to make at the start of old videos, just to confirm that recording has started.

Allow me a brief moment of melodrama to ask: Was this how Kronos felt when he was overthrown by Zeus, not long after he himself overthrew Uranus?

I might just be starting to understand the grumpiness that my dad and his fellow boomers have directed towards my