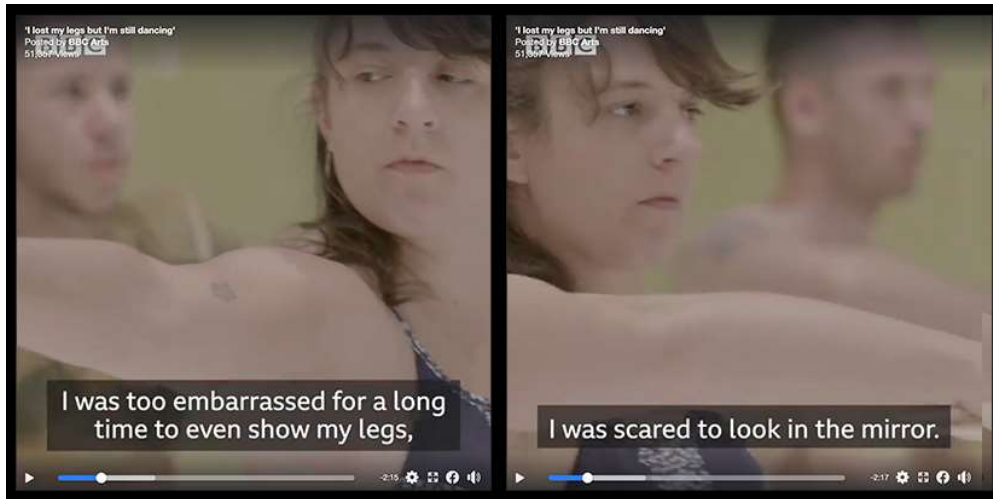


Dancing without legs: an amputee's inspiring tale



CHEW WEI SHAN profiles a dancer who lost her legs, but went on to dance again.

“Dance is for everyone,” declares amputee dancer Kat Hawkins. But, she did not always feel this way.

While she had other talents and passions as a child, dance was Kat’s first love. She began dancing and performing from a very young age. Through her childhood and her teens, she lived and breathed dance.

“Dance was like a language that my body had learned over a lifetime,” she shares in her story for the BBC. “Time stood still as I leapt and **pirouetted**. I held the audience’s emotions in my grasp.”

However, when Ms Hawkins was just 19 years old, her life was thrown cruelly off course. One morning, in her first year of university, she stumbled out of bed **delirious**. She could barely walk or speak. Thankfully, she unlocked her bedroom door just in time to collapse in front of her flatmates outside, who immediately called the ambulance.

That day, Ms Hawkins and her family learnt that she had meningitis B, a life-threatening illness. Her whole body was being attacked by deadly bacteria. Doctors did not expect her to survive the night.

Miraculously, Ms Hawkins fought through and lived till the next morning. Because of how severe the infection was, there had been no blood flow in her legs for too long.

“My immune system went into overdrive,” she explained. “Blood rushed away from my limbs to my internal organs to save them.”

A different life

Then, her world shattered. Her doctors returned with grave news — both her legs would have to be amputated at the knee. Upon hearing this, she could not help but scream out loud.

“How could I look at myself in the mirror? Would anybody find me attractive again? How would I navigate the world?” Her mind filled with despair. “I’m not going to be able to walk, let alone dance.”

The harrowing operation at the hospital may have been 13 years ago, but she remembers vividly how it first felt to lose her legs.

“It felt as if cats were nibbling my toes — a tingling feeling, as though my legs were still alive,” she described. Yet, when she looked down at her body, she could see that her legs — the same legs that had carried her through years of intensive rehearsals, delicate choreography, and across multiple stages — were forever gone.

In the months and years that followed, Ms Hawkins learnt how to use a wheelchair, crutches, and eventually, two **prosthetic** legs. Like a child, she had to learn how to walk all over again, this time on plastic and metal structures.

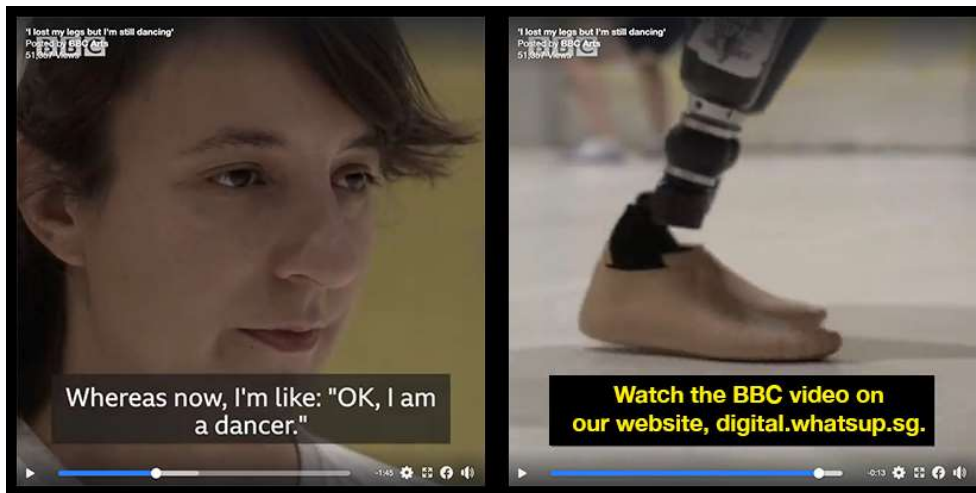
The journey was not easy. The process was **arduous** and challenging, often causing swelling and sharp pains in her stumps. Mentally and emotionally, it was even more taxing.

“After the amputation, I was desperate to try and reclaim my life,” Ms Hawkins wrote in her feature for *Stylist* magazine. “I didn’t want to feel disabled, I didn’t want to be disabled. I would hide my legs, and I was too embarrassed to tell people I was an amputee. I would see myself in the mirror and feel sick at the sight of my own body.”

At that point, she thought that dance could no longer be a part of her life. She dedicated her time to honing other skills by gaining experience in journalism, film, and other forms of art making. But, Ms Hawkins’ love for dance simply could not be **quelled**.

Back to dancing

Seven years later, Ms Hawkins found herself back on the dance floor. She discovered Candoco, an inclusive dance company made up of both able and disabled dancers. In that environment, it dawned on her that “all bodies were equal”. There were other disabled performers around her, and she felt safe for the first time in many years.



Before, she did not even know how to think about dancing as an amputee because she had never seen any dancers that looked like her. But now, around her were others who “knew what it was like to be stared at, to feel like they didn’t fit in,” she wrote for the BBC.

She stopped thinking of her prosthetic legs as limitations. Instead, she began to see them as new instruments to expand her physical vocabulary. Now, she had different and unique tools to express emotion and intention with her body.

Ms Hawkins had a life-changing **epiphany**. Candoco changed everything she had ever thought about dance and who it was for. Indeed, “dance is for everyone,” she realised. “It’s only the way it is traditionally taught that makes us think it’s not.”

Today, Ms Hawkins continues to dance, write, make films, and inspire people around her.

“All bodies are worthy of respect,” she reminds us in her piece for *Marie Claire* magazine. “No matter what they look like or how they operate.”

VOCAB BUILDER

pirouetted (say “pi-re-wet-ted”; verb) = whirled around on only one foot.

delirious (say “dili-ri-es”; adjective) = unable to think clearly because of fever.

prosthetic (say “pros-the-tik”; adjective) = relating to an artificial body part.

arduous (say “a-du-es”; adjective) = very difficult and tiring.

quelled (say “kwel’d”; verb) = stopped.

epiphany (say “i-pi-fe-nee”; noun) = a moment of great realisation.

Affordable prosthetics

Prosthetic limbs are very expensive. One prosthetic leg typically costs thousands of dollars. How do people in poor countries manage?

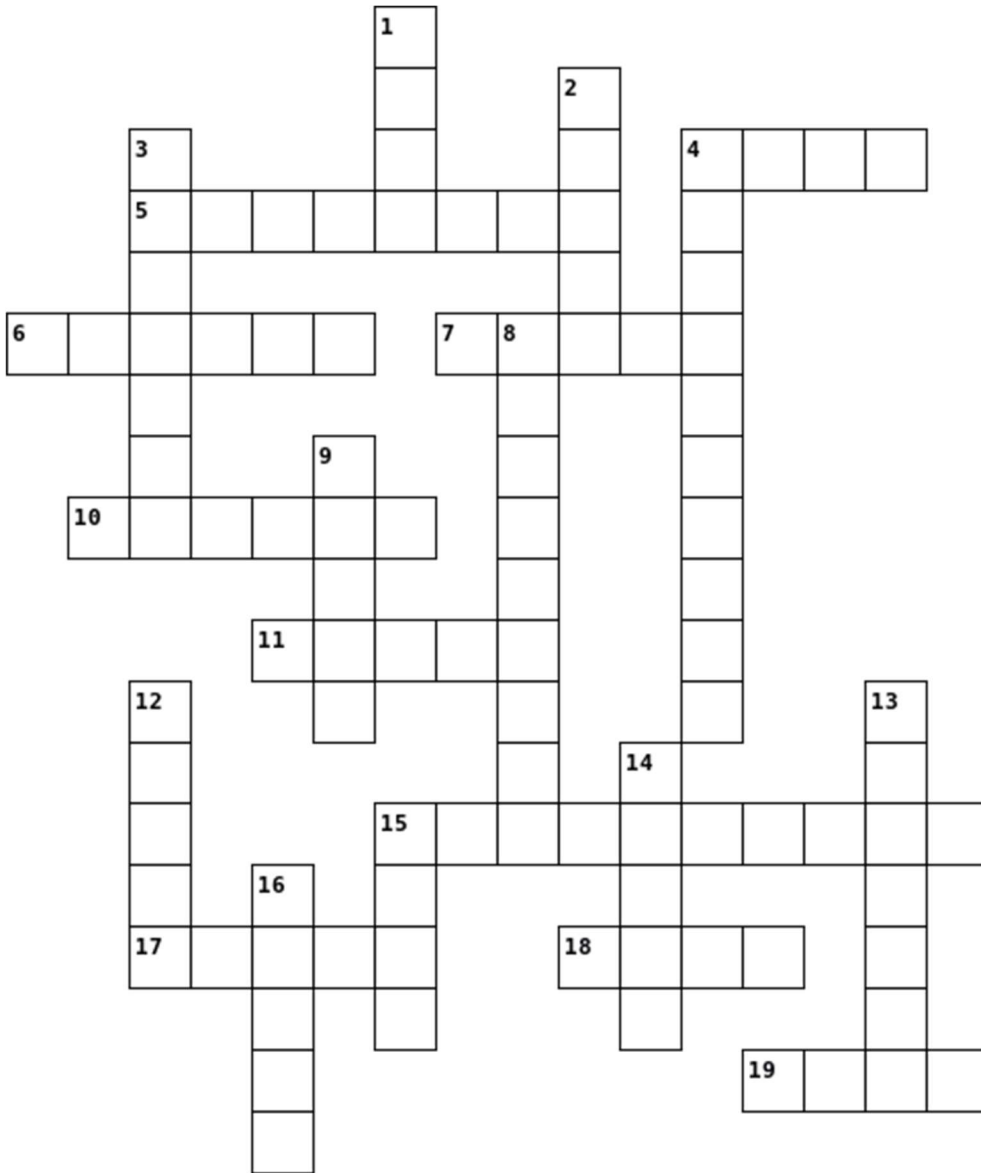
“In many developing countries, the best option for amputees is a bamboo staff to walk with,” says Krista Donaldson, the chairperson of D-Rev, a non-profit group that designs products for the poor. To help them, D-Rev launched a prosthetic leg in 2013 that cost just US\$80 (S\$110).

Thankfully, other groups around the world are also working hard to craft and manufacture more affordable devices. Egypt’s Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services is one of them, and they have received generous donations from the Japanese government. There is also LIMBS International, which operates in nine countries to build and deliver prosthetics to people in poverty.

In more recent years, remarkable individuals have stepped up to help, too. Guillermo Martinez, a 24-year-old engineer from Madrid, has been using 3D printing technology to produce prosthetic limbs more cheaply, making it more accessible to many more people.

Truly, human beings around the world never cease to inspire in their endless quest to invent and innovate, to make beautiful art, and most of all, to help one another.

Activity



CLUES**Across**

4. People who are not at all rich.
5. Surgery to cut off a limb.
6. Martinez is 3D printing aids there.
7. Arms and legs. Also, an organisation.
10. Dancers communicate using theirs.
11. It took that long for Kat to dance again.
15. Sit in one and you can wheel around.
17. Neither lesser nor greater.
18. In time, Kat replaced despair with it.
19. Aim for the sky, like Kat did!

Down

1. Pirouette: to spin on only one.
2. Thanks to sheer grit, Kat's came true.
3. A very inclusive dance company.
4. An artificial arm or leg.
8. When everyone feels they belong.
9. Very high body temperature.
12. Kat loves to do this. Do you?
13. Reading Kat's is very inspiring.
14. Circulates through veins and arteries.
15. To be able to, even bamboo can help.
16. To stamp out, suppress, stop.