

Changing society, one step at a time

Student born with dwarfism aims to make society more inclusive, via policies and from ground up

Sue-Ann Tan

At the age of 21, Mr Lee Ci En has delivered motivational talks, organised appreciation events for the "unsung heroes" of society and dreams of changing Singapore through policies and ground-up initiatives.

Born with short-limbed dwarfism, the Singapore Management University undergraduate stands at 1.25m. But he is a towering presence with his drive and ambition to change society for the better.

For his academic achievements and his work in the community, Mr Lee was awarded the Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Scholarship for Persons with Disabilities last month.

"Sometimes people want to change others who are different, but really, it's about changing society to be more inclusive," he said. "I want to highlight the stories of others, see things from their perspective and put myself out there to help them. I want to do something meaningful."

As a child, he dreamt of being a newsreader. "I wanted to know the news first-hand and also, to be famous," he said with a laugh.

Mr Lee then decided that he wanted to be "on the front line of the nation", through making policies that could change the lives of others.

Knowing the needs of others is something he continually focuses



on, with his own experiences having showed him what it is like to be excluded or treated differently.

"From a young age, I noticed people pointing at me and whispering. I realised I was different, and it was not always easy to deal with. I wondered if there was something wrong with me," he said.

When smartphones became ubiquitous, he noticed people would sneak photos of him. But Mr Lee shrugs it off with a smile.

"I've decided it doesn't matter to me. It's like a new thing that they don't know how to deal with, so they take a photo and share it later with others. It's just a human reaction, though it could be done more sensitively."

Besides the startled reactions of strangers, Mr Lee's early challenges were in learning how to use the staircase. He recalled sitting at the top of the stairs and trying to bounce down one step at a time.

He learnt to walk when he was about four or five years old. "My parents stuck peanuts along the wall to encourage me to walk to them and get them," he said.

In fact, he credits his parents – mum is a physics teacher and dad is a corporate secretary – as being a great support in his growing years.

"My parents told me that God loves me, regardless of who I am or how I look. So I decided that being different really wasn't that important."

In school, he had buddies to help carry his bag and his teachers would make sure that he got the assistance he needed. "There was some teasing," he said. "People sometimes put things where I couldn't reach them, for a joke."

As a teenager, Mr Lee, who has a younger brother, took part in debates and joined the computer club, while he envied other students in co-curricular activities such as uniformed groups.

"I wanted to be in the National Cadet Corps," he said. "I saw my friends working out and caring about their muscles and bodies. That was when I realised I was living a different life and slowly came to accept that."

Now a political science major in his third year, Mr Lee strives to help the community on top of

INSPIRING WORDS

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MR LEE CI EN

studying for his degree.

From December 2015 to January this year, he co-led a six-member team to read with 37 children aged seven to 11 at a children's home. They also helped to buy books and built a reading nook in the home.

In July last year, he led an

appreciation drive for MRT staff at five stations, in which he helped to pack 240 goolie bags and collected over 300 thank-you notes from university students for the staff.

His achievements and attitude towards life have led his friends to look up to him. "I am continually inspired by his conviction, resilience and optimistic outlook that motivate others to contribute to society as well," said Mr Kenneth Yap, 25, a university student and Mr Lee's friend.

But one of Mr Lee's dearest achievements in recent years has been a personal one: overcoming physical hurdles to go to Outward Bound School in 2015.

"I did things I thought were not physically possible for me," he said.

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