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## **Young leader pays tribute to professor who believed in him this Teacher's Day**



Oon Tian Sern (right), 25, with his professor, Hiro Saito, who taught him while he was studying in Singapore Management University. PHOTO: SPH

Behind every success story is an inspiring teacher who first believed in that untested potential. Oon Tian Sern, a 2018 recipient of the Queen's Young Leader Award, has his university professor to thank for giving him that extra push to success. Nivani Elangovan finds out more.

Not many people can say they were selected to receive the Queen's Young Leader Award at 25. Even fewer can claim the award was for a barely tangible prototype of an online social enterprise portal. Not Mr Oon Tian Sern, though.

He was one of only two Singaporeans to receive the award in London this year from Queen Elizabeth II. The Queen's Young Leader Award recognises and celebrates exceptional youths from across the Commonwealth who take the lead in their communities and use their skills to transform lives.

Mr Oon embarked on a 12-day mentoring and networking residency before receiving his award from the monarch.

The founder and chief executive of Acceset, a portal that allows people to discuss mental health issues and seek help anonymously, is honoured that his potential was recognised and he was chosen for the award.

The idea for the portal stemmed from Mr Oon witnessing his mother's mental health issues as a child. His father worked in sales at a department store and his mum suffered from depression since he was seven. Money was tight as his father was the sole breadwinner, and at that time, there was very little dialogue around mental healthcare. It was difficult finding affordable and accessible counselling services for his mother.

His childhood brush with mental healthcare issues stayed with him. In 2015, when he was in his second year at Singapore Management University studying for a sociology degree, he realised that he could use technology to help others in a similar situation as his mother.

Mr Oon says: "I knew that access to care is a problem that affected my mum. I wanted to find a way to address this."

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Professor Hiro calls Mr Oon "brave", as he was motivated by fear and adopted a 'do-or-die' attitude.  
PHOTO: SPH

But his dream may never have become reality without the help of Professor Hiro Saito, his Global and Transnational Sociology lecturer, who calls Mr Oon "brave".

It is not a term Mr Oon would use to describe himself. Mr Oon says he was motivated by fear, and the knowledge that he had only one shot at university to make something of himself.

"Fear drove me to adopt a 'do-or-die' attitude," says the reticent young man, who graduated in 2017 with a sociology degree on the back of two scholarships awarded by the university.

#### MAKING THE MOST OF WHAT LIFE GIVES YOU

Perhaps it was this attitude that led him to show up in Professor Hiro's office with a metaphorical bagful of questions, unsatisfied with the B+ grade he got in the professor's class, when he had been gunning for an A.

"I had so many questions and follow-up questions, but Prof Hiro was so patient about it. I recorded down all the notes, and in the second assignment I got my A," Mr Oon says.

Unafraid of hard work, Mr Oon volunteered to be Professor Hiro's teaching assistant. The professor agreed and eventually allowed Mr Oon to customise a writing workshop for students who faced similar struggles with language at school. Professor Hiro proceeded to give him half-a-class, and observed him from the corner, leaving him to his own devices.

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Professor Hiro says that Mr Oon was willing to talk about his own difficulties and problems, and never shy to ask for help. PHOTO: SPH

“It really built my confidence. I was able to look at the whole idea of service as a form of leadership,” Mr Oon says.

Perhaps knowing too well the challenges of getting emotional and moral support, Mr Oon was never shy to ask for help. Prof Hiro says: “He is willing to talk to me about his own difficulties and problems, and I get a better sense of how students might struggle, and how I can make things easier for them.”

Mr Oon explains: “I come from a low-income family, so I don't feel there's a whole sense of risk. There's really nothing much to lose when you have nothing much to begin with.”

#### CREATING ACCESSET OUT OF NOTHING

Based on this mantra, Mr Oon invested eight months of hard work into coming up with a dirty prototype for Acceset. After failed attempts to emulate an online portal for mental health discussion elsewhere, he was close to giving up. As a social science student trying to start up a web portal, he faced a steep learning curve when it came to creating an online portal. Reflecting on that period, he says: “I don't think I made sense to anyone.”

By a stroke of luck, Mr Oon found an investor who believed in his product, and though the company is yet to turn profitable, it is easy to believe that he will succeed in turning Acceset into a mental health resource portal for all.

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