

GenerationGrit

Normal tech student who beat the odds to practise law

It took his mother losing her job for Jason Chua to turn his life around. This is his story in our series on inspiring millennials.

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Mr Jason Chua never expected to make it to university. In fact, he never gave much thought to what he would do past secondary school.

At Stamford Primary School, he scored a dismal 151 points in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which landed him in the Normal (Technical) stream, for the least academically inclined pupils.

At St Andrew's Secondary, he remained a lacklustre student. After all, he reckoned, no matter how well or badly he did, he would end up in the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) with most of his peers. Being in Normal (Technical) had its own set of expectations.

He said: "It was very difficult to try to study as everyone was not interested (in studying). If you suddenly said you had to study, the others would ostracise you or laugh at you for being a nerd."

And then there was the ever-present condescension from others.

"Everyone - from students in the Express (stream) to my relatives - used to laugh at me as I was from the Normal (Technical) stream. I felt the world was against us and everyone looked down on us and felt that we cannot make it."

Ultimately, however, Mr Chua defied anyone's attempt to put him in a box. Today, at age 29, he has a law degree and works as a prosecutor at a government agency.

What sparked the impressive academic turnaround? His mum's re-trenchment from her secretarial job when he was 16, he said.

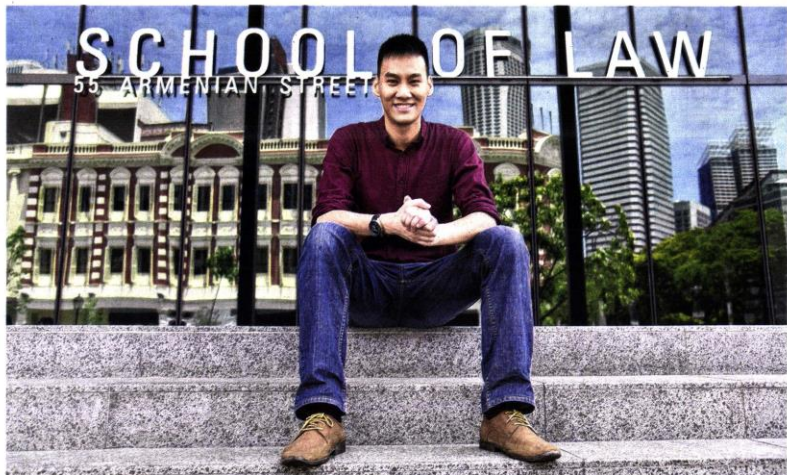
"When she was re-trenched, I had no money and no education. I couldn't do anything for her," he said. "That night, for the first time, I took a hard look at what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to study, to change my life, to make my mum proud of me. I wanted to give her a better life, and I didn't want to waste mine."

His mother had left an abusive marriage when he was just a baby. Mr Chua knew how hard she struggled to raise him and his older brother, who is now a financial analyst.

Poor results aside, he was once, during primary school, caught by a department store for shoplifting, though they did not turn him over to the police. He had stolen the toy "for the thrill of it" and because his mum would not buy it for him.

It was only as he grew older that he realised how it was a struggle for her to make ends meet on her salary of about \$2,000 a month. She also had to support her parents.

In secondary school, he worked part-time at a fast-food outlet, for



From being in the Normal (Technical) stream, Mr Jason Chua went on to take his O levels as a private candidate, went through the three-year A-level programme at Millennia Institute and scored 3 As in the A-level exams. He graduated with a law degree from SMU last year and is now a prosecutor. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

\$3.50 an hour, to earn money to buy cigarettes and for other expenses.

When his mother was re-trenched, Mr Chua went to help her pack up her things and overheard a colleague making snide remarks about her. He no longer remembers what the man said, but he won't forget how they almost got into a fight.

That night, his pride wounded and his ambition ignited, he promised to excel in his studies.

He decided to take the O-level examinations as a private student at City College, since the road was not open to him as a Normal (Technical) student then. The hardest subject was English, as he had a poor command of the language and was more comfortable speaking Mandarin and Cantonese.

"I went to YouTube to learn how to speak good English and I read everything I could find," he said. "Back then, my English was very broken and I dared not speak it to many people as I felt very *pai seh* (embarrassed in Hokkien) when

they corrected me."

To his pleasant surprise, he scored a respectable 16 points for his best five subjects. And he did not fail English: he had a B4.

Following the O levels, he decided to gun for the A levels to "challenge" himself. So he attended the three-year A-level programme at Millennia Institute and took a diploma in psychology from a private school at the same time - studying "day and night".

He scored 3 As in the A-level exams - a feat mentioned by then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, now Deputy Prime Minister, in Parliament in 2012 to highlight students that exemplified resilience.

"I felt so proud of myself. My mum was beaming with joy," he said.

He then set his sights on law school - again to prove he could do it - and also because he wanted to "champion social justice".

He had watched a documentary on foreign workers in Singapore who did not know where to turn to for help when they suffered injuries at work. That sparked a desire to help the marginalised.

Accepted into SMU Law, he ini-

GENERATION GRIT

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tially felt like the odd one out although he eventually made a group of friends who were very supportive and helped him with his studies.

"I felt a bit inferior as the students were all from top schools. They had a good upbringing and many lived in landed property. I was five years older than my female peers and three years older than the males, he said. "I felt I didn't belong."

But he told himself not to give up, continuing to give tuition three times a week to put himself through university. He graduated last year with his law degree.

Associate Professor Jason Tan from the National Institute of Education's Policy & Leadership Studies department, said the odds of a Normal (Technical) student making it to university here are extremely low.

Only about 1 per cent of local graduates from 2015 to 2017 were from Normal (Technical), compared with 5 per cent from Normal (Academic). The rest had come through the Express stream, according to Education Ministry data.

SMU School of Law Associate Professor Eugene Tan, who had taught Mr Chua a course in ethics, described him as determined and conscientious.

Prof Tan said: "It's a significant achievement for any student from Normal (Technical) stream to make it to a Singapore law school. Not many... would dream of making it to law school, given that the law degree is extremely popular and competitive in Singapore. So it takes a fair amount of grit and perseverance to thrive in an environment where high performers are the norm."

Academics aside, Mr Chua makes it a point to help those in need.

He started volunteering with hospice patients in his late teens, hoping to be a better person. Now, he regularly visits a group of destitute seniors he befriended.

Mr Chua lives with his mother and brother in a four-room flat. He has never met his father and says he has no wish to. He said: "He's like a stranger to me."

While he has achieved some measure of success, Mr Chua constantly reminds himself to be humble and not forget what it was like to be looked down on.

"I dared to dream that one day, I would become someone quite successful. I wouldn't say I'm very successful now but it is because I dared to dream that I think nothing is impossible. If you put your heart and soul into it, you can do well," he said.

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