

Publication: The Sunday Times , p B07
 Date: 05 March 2017
 Headline: Labour of love putting the poor to work

It Changed My Life

Labour of love putting the poor to work

28-year-old behind start-up that helps artisans and communities by connecting them with tourists



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Jamon Mok scrunches his face into a grimace when asked to describe his childhood.

"Painful," he says.

"I was always bullied because I was poor and he had a bad stutter. To make things worse, his English was poor and he had a bad stutter. My stutter was worse when I was under stress or whenever I got bullied. No one could understand me," he says.

One wonders what his taunters would make of him now.

The spluttering butterball is now a strapping 28-year-old, one who articulates his thoughts and ideas coherently in a pleasantly deep voice.

He also exudes a confidence born of his experience in building a social enterprise which helps poor communities in 10 countries and 40 cities, as well as his love for what he does.

Mr Mok is the founder and chief executive of Backstreet Academy, a start-up which curates localised experiences, tours and activities – from knife-making in Luang Prabang to insect cooking in Siem Reap and archery in Yogyakarta – for travellers.

More than just a money-making venture, however, the peer-to-peer platform sets out to help artisans and communities which live below the poverty line of US\$1.90 (S\$2.70) a day.

"What we do puts us right in the middle of technology, travel and social enterprise, things we are interested in. If everything works out well, Backstreet Academy may become as big as Airbnb," he says, referring to the online marketplace and hospitality service.

Polite and engaging, Mr Mok – who picked his first name because of his love for Spanish ham – is the second of three children of a management consultant and a housewife.

His early years were spent wrestling with weight and self-esteem issues.

"I was totally round, couldn't run and couldn't play sports. And if you couldn't play sports, nobody wanted to play with you," says the former pupil of Tao Nan Primary.

He languished academically too because of his poor command of English.

"I had to go for supplementary classes from Primary 2 onwards," says Mr Mok, who grew up in a Chinese-speaking home. "I didn't dare to go for the things I wanted to or ask for anything."

Things turned around when his uncle, a teacher, took him under his wing in Secondary 3. The coaching, especially in maths and science, was grueling but he vaulted from the bottom to third position in class.

"It was a huge shot of confidence. I realised I could do well if I wanted to," says the 1.78m-tall man who sheds kilos and had a growth spurt when he started playing football.

Around this time, his English started improving when he became a big fan of fantasy fiction and espionage novels by the likes of Terry Brooks and Jeffrey Archer.

He did well in his O levels at Dunman Secondary, and went to Nanyang Junior College where he made it to the football team. In fact, he became so fit that he was in the commando unit during his national service.

His A-level results were solid; he got into the course and university he wanted: business management at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

"I felt my biggest problem then

was not being able to speak up because of the issues I had before. SMU has the reputation of rejecting its undergraduates speak and be articulate. I felt that I really needed to get out of my comfort zone," he says.

To prepare for his course, he started reading business books while he was in the army. These included stories about the founding of companies like Google, and the autobiographies of Richard Branson, the British airline maverick; Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi social entrepreneur who founded the Grameen Bank; and the late C.K. Prahalad, the influential Indian management guru.

Prahalad's book *The Fortune At The Bottom Of The Pyramid* made an especially deep impression.

"Essentially," he was saying that the poorest people represent a huge market opportunity and social enterprises can do a lot of good by both making money and making an impact by providing goods and services to them. I saw that as one of the models I could follow," he says.

That plan became firmer when he backpacked through countries including Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Nepal and India after national service and before starting university.

For the first time, he came across widespread poverty. He met many people toiling to earn in a month what some of his Singaporeans spend on a single lunch.

"I asked myself: How could this be happening? How could people be living this way?" says Mr Mok, who decided he would set up a social enterprise while he was in university.

In his first semester, he started Project Gazaar ("gazaar" means awesome in Nepali) as a community service project with a couple of other students in Nepal. The idea was to organise business competitions and award business grants for budding local entrepreneurs in village schools.

"Our project was based on poverty alleviation, how we as business students could help villagers get out of poverty through social entrepreneurship. We taught them basic business concepts like marketing, accounting and business plans."

Teams with winning ideas were given a grant to launch them.

As part of the competition, participants had to take part in the Gazaar Game where they were given 20 Nepalese rupees (10 Singapore cents).

"They had to grow it within 24 hours as though their family depended on it. They'd complain but in almost all instances, they would not lose the money. Some grew it by three or four rupees but there was one guy Harkaman who came back with 220 rupees."

He did it, Mr Mok says, by making several trips up the mountains to buy tomatoes and lemons and selling them in his village where the fruits commanded higher prices.

"He told us: 'If you had given me two more days, I would have given you one thousand rupees.'"

Harkaman went on to win a business grant of \$500. He used it to set up a mushroom farm which he eventually grew to five. In fact, the 20-something became so successful that he now operates a cooperative, and is helping people in his community.

Mr Mok says: "Before the competition, he didn't know what he wanted in life. He just dreamt of being a migrant labourer, but suddenly, he was given the opportunity and the exposure, and he discovered skills he never knew he had. It's very inspiring."

Project Gazaar turned Mr Mok into a mini celebrity; he was invited to speak about it at a TEDxYouth event in Singapore in 2011.

It grew bigger and other teams have since taken it to different villages in countries like India, Indonesia and Cambodia.

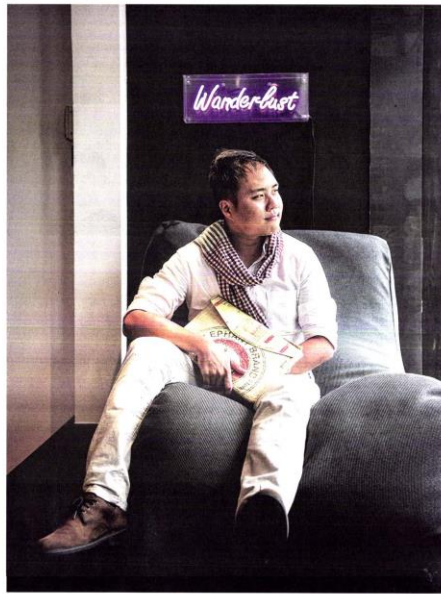
Inspired by its success, Mr Mok raised \$15,000 through a crowd-funding campaign to launch Gazaar Social Ventures in 2011.

"We were hoping to turn it into a more sustainable business. We wanted to invest in promising entrepreneurs and use their returns to invest in others," he says.

Through a competition in Kathmandu, they invested amounts – ranging from \$2,000 to \$6,000 – in four businesses including a candle-making outfit and a knitting firm.

"All of them made money and are still running except one, a pest control company. The people we helped were successful but the fund wasn't sustainable. We needed a bigger quantum of money to make it work."

This, he explains, has to do with a fund's complex structure, and how money can be taken out of only management fees and profits. With



Mr Mok, founder and chief executive of Backstreet Academy, says that the venture not only helps to increase income, but it also helps these artisans preserve their craft and pass on their skills. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Mr Mok at a wine-making workshop in Laos, and tourists attending a Javanese archery workshop in Indonesia arranged by Backstreet Academy. The peer-to-peer platform, which started operations in 2014, curates localised experiences, tours and activities for travellers. PHOTOS: JAMON MOK

do not have smartphones to handle bookings.

"We bring the tourists and the translators to them," he says.

Mr Dhanank's life, Mr Mok adds, has improved tremendously.

"Before, he felt like some production worker. But now, people see him as a master. He is also able to increase his income by two or three times just by teaching a few classes a week," he says.

Positive reviews by travellers on blogs and sites such as Trip Advisor gave Backstreet Academy a fillip, and it soon expanded to other countries including Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines.

"Today, we offer 1,200 experiences – from stone carving to dumpling making – with more than 700 artisans and entrepreneurs all over the world. In Cambodia, our biggest market, we have more than 100 artisans," says the entrepreneur, who is already exploring new markets such as Africa and Myanmar.

Although it has a lean team of about 10 staff, Backstreet Academy has already started making a profit, and it now makes about \$500,000 a year.

Mr Mok, whose girlfriend works in networking service LinkedIn, is aware that many of his peers draw a bigger pay cheque than he does but it does not bother him.

"We can see our value. If we continue like this, we would outpace them in a few years and we would still own a business," says Mr Mok, who owns more than 40 per cent of the company.

"Besides, I've never quite liked the idea of a daily wage working for others. It's more fulfilling when you have a business which adds value to and makes a difference in the lives of others."

What is unique about Backstreet Academy, Mr Mok says, is its use of technology which enables artisans who do not speak English and who

down with him for the next five hours and learnt how he did the masks. At the end of the session, we paid him a small sum of money as a token of our appreciation and he was really thankful," he says.

Mr Mok says the session was not only a magical and authentic experience for Mr Gurning and him, but also did wonders for the mask maker's confidence.

When the mask maker asked the duo if they could get him more students, the idea for Backstreet Academy took root.

"We hit on the idea of focussing on tourism, and creating a whole ecosystem of tourism entrepreneurs and getting people to learn from them. Besides increasing their income, it also helps these artisans preserve their craft and pass on their skills."

Mr Mok and his team spent several months identifying suitable tourists entrepreneurs, training them, building a platform and marketing it to travellers.

Backstreet Academy started operations in 2014 when Mr Mok was in his final year. Besides the \$150,000 raised, he and his co-founders invested \$10,000 into the company.

The mask maker Kedar Dhanank was one of the early beneficiaries.

"We taught him how to host tourists, helped him invest a bit in his environment to make it more pleasant for his students and also set up a translator system. Every time there is a booking, a translator would be alerted and once it is confirmed, he or she would go and pick up the tourists, take them to the shop and be the interpreter," says Mr Mok, adding that takings are split between the different parties.

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