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Poon Shu Qi at The Kampung Too. (PHOTO: Wan Ting Koh/Yahoo Finance Singapore)

Just weeks after completing her bar exam last December, Poon Shu Qi signed a lease that would change the course of her career after four years of toiling at law school.

With the help of three partners, the 24-year-old decided to set up her own gym, The Kampung Too, which currently offers tailored fitness classes to 50 clients.

Speaking to Yahoo Finance Singapore from her gym's three-month-old premises in Geylang, Poon said that the stars aligned for her when the 1,600 square foot space became available for lease in December — the same month she completed her bar examinations to become a corporate lawyer.

Her mentor, who owns the sister gym —The Kampung Gym — nearby, chanced upon the listing and showed it to Poon, who jumped at the opportunity.

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Less than a week later, Poon had a new gym space. Fearing her parents' reaction, Poon only told them about the career switch a few days after signing the contract. She mustered up the courage one night and penned her thoughts in a blog post, sending the link to her parents, who were in a separate room at that point. They thought she was joking.

"We just talked about whether it's a wise choice. But I think ultimately they would know that if I want to do something I would still do it. They just told me to be a bit more careful. Eventually they were more supportive just that they were a bit shocked," Poon said while seated on a pyro box in the open-space gym.

Nevertheless, Poon, armed with S\$60,000 to S\$80,000 in mostly savings, loans and funding from three partners, spent the next month or so renovating the space, buying and installing gym equipment. By the end of January, The Kampung Too was ready for its soft launch.

Law student and part-time fitness coach

Asked why she had gone into law in the first place, Poon said, like many others her age, that she was uncertain about a career choice. She received a scholarship from the Singapore Management University and enrolled in Yong Pung How School of Law in 2017.

One year into law school, Poon started her own fitness journey by joining a gym with her parents and was immediately hooked. "I just felt like I liked the growth in myself and I kind of wanted to see it for everyone else," she recalled.

In her second year of study, Poon snagged a law training contract and was due to complete a six-month stint upon graduation as part of requirements to become a full-fledged corporate lawyer. But fitness still held a place in her heart that law could not displace.

By 2021 — her final year — she began coaching in gyms, including international franchise F45, fitting nearly 15 to 20 hours a week of coaching in between studies and internships. Despite her bustling schedule, fitness was "non-negotiable", she said.

"I really tried to make it work because it's something that I wanted to do. I felt in a sense that (it was) non negotiable and that I must have some pockets of time to train," she said earnestly.

"All along I wanted to do both but at the same time I knew that it would be a struggle to do both, just because there's really no time at all. So I was struggling with the fact that I still wanted to do fitness, I wanted to coach, but at the same time I have to do law."

Even then, law as a career was losing its shine. "When I look at a lot of lawyers working I felt like I wasn't sure if that was something that I could do. When people tell me they left the office at 3am, I was a bit scared of that," she said.

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Forgoing salary for half a year

While her peers may be earning a mid to high four-digit salary, Poon has decided to forgo a salary for the initial four to six months in order to help the business grow. Her current revenue is enough to foot the bills and pay a part-timer who coaches at the gym.

She hopes to double her client base by the end of the year, and currently offers one-week trials with unlimited classes to potential clients. Otherwise, her classes are pegged at S\$200 a month for unlimited sessions alongside other class packages.

“It’s my business so I want to see it grow as well so I’m completely okay with not taking a salary. I still want to see it through in the long run,” she said. While she does not see herself returning to law in the near future, law would still be her backup plan should her current venture wind up.

Sharing her experience

Since opening her gym, Poon took to LinkedIn to share her experience and found that her circumstances resonated with many others. At least 40 individuals sought her out for her advice or with their own thoughts.

These were mostly those who not want to do law but did not know what else to do; or those who wanted to do law but had a side interest.

She would tell the former group to stick to their current study or job while exploring what they are interested in, while her advice for the second group is to have a good backup plan, have their finances in order, and have reliable partners they can trust.

“I didn’t know that (there are) so many people facing the same problem, which is also something that I kind of want to tell people; It’s fine to be confused,” she said.

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"A lot of people out there are very confused as to what they want to do and work has been stressful and they don't know if (it's something) they should continue in. I would say take some time off and reflect and think about it and recognise you only have one life, so make full use of that life."