Wanted list to Dean’s List

Jimmy Boh wants to help other ex-convicts get back on their feet

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY
Wong Kim Hoh

JIMMY Boh is ebullient, having just finished his first year at the Singapore Management University on a triumphant note. He was placed in the top 5 per cent of his cohort and earned himself a place on the Dean’s List.

Seven years ago, he was also on a list, albeit a more diabolical one. Then living the life of a fugitive drug peddler, he was wanted by the Central Narcotics Bureau.

It ended one day, he chanced upon some colleagues smoking marijuana. He asked them what it was and how much it cost.

He says, laughing: “The first thing that came to my mind was not whether marijuana was good or bad, but how big the profit margins were.”

He became the delivery boy for a supplier. Not for long, because “I developed my own contacts.”

His network of clients grew and by the time he left national service in 1997, he was easily raking in nearly $6,000 a month. His family begged him to stop but to no avail. Not surprisingly, he also attracted the attention of CNB officials.

“It had to keep moving because they were hunting me down.”

Around this time, his mother fell sick.

“I felt that I was such a failure. I was depressed, I drank and smoked heavily.”

He felt “both a sense of relief and a sense of doom” when he was arrested.

About one year into his term at Tanah Merah Prison, he was allowed to see his dying mother in Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

“All my relatives were in the room, crying. She was lying there. Her organs had failed, her eyes were closed. I didn’t know if she could hear me but I put her hand to my face and then I saw her tears.”

He adds: “I told her not to worry about me, to go safely if she had to.”

She died shortly after he left the hospital. He spent the next few months in a deep funk. “I really hated myself then.”

He found religion and managed to pick himself up. He read voraciously.

He applied to sit for his A levels through self-study, scoring one A, two Bs, one D and a B3 for General Paper.

Because of his good conduct, he spent the last year of his term helping out at the Kaki Bukit Prison School where he taught and counselled inmates, organised activities and even started an alumnus.

He applied to SMU because he saw its newspaper ads which emphasise its appreciation for students who are “different”.

“I’m really different, I’m an ex-convict,” he jokes, adding that he had to declare his past in his application form.

He started his first year at SMU last August. Before that, he attended an interview where he was asked his opinion on the new Consumer Rights Act. He was never grilled about his past.

Mr Alan Goh, SMU’s director of undergraduate admissions, says: “We suspeded Jimmy’s character and aspirations in a holistic manner. We saw through his A-level grades a single-minded pursuit to excel. We could feel the fire-in-the-belly and the steady determination to succeed.

“We did not sense any hint of a plea to be given a second chance. That he wore his heart on his sleeve is enough evidence to convince us that he has the potential to be transformed into a gem worthy of his place and contribution to society.”

Boh confesses he nursed initial trepidation about adjusting to a new life.

“But I told myself I must go all out to make things work for me.”

He doesn’t hide his past. In fact, for his module on Leadership and Team Building, he rounded up seven of his course mates and took them to the Prison School in Kaki Bukit.

They decided to hold a workshop for the inmates, teaching them “how to let go of their past, set goals and take the right steps” towards reintegrating into society.

“I told myself that I would one day return to the Prison School, not as an inmate but as a volunteer. And I wanted to show my course mates that inmates are normal, just like them.”

He wants to devote time to raising acceptance of convicts. “We can say we have succeeded when we find convict teachers in mainstream schools.”

He’s hoping to graduate with a double degree — Bachelor of Business Management and Bachelor of Accounting — and work in the finance industry.

Boh, who now lives with his father and younger brother, says he has made many new friends on campus.

But he has no girlfriend. “Most of them are seven or eight years younger. Anyway, girls can wait. The Dean’s List is more important.”

Send your comments to stifle@sph.com.sg