He had a dream

O-level failure Abdul Shariff Aboo Kassim longed to go to university, and he did not give up until he made it come true.

By CINDY TONG

MR ABDUL, Shariff Aboo Kassim had a dream. He wanted to go to university, sit with brilliant academics and graduate as a professional engineer. He could then get a good job, earn the tools of the trade and start his own business one day.

But it did not seem possible that he could turn his dream into reality. He had failed five out of six subjects in his O-level examinations, and was working as a store assistant, earning a mere $20 a day. When he shared his hopes with close friends and family, they mocked him. With only one O-level pass, how could he even think he was capable of going to university?

But Mr Abdul did not pay any heed to those who doubt ed him. Despite the criticism, he pursued his dreams. His critics were finally silenced when he was accepted into an economics degree programme at the Singapore Management University (SMU) last year.

Overcoming obstacles

His persistence and hard work may have paid off, but the road to success was fraught with obstacles. Mr Abdul Shariff, now 39, recalled: "Sometimes, I would wonder if what my friends and family said was true. What if I really wasn't good enough? I almost gave up."

He had moved on from his store assistant job, and had been working as a security guard with G4S. He said: "It was a stable job in a good organisation, and people could understand why I wasn't satisfied."

"But my life was so dull and routine. I would wake up, go to work, go home for dinner, sleep, and the next day was the same. It was so boring, and I was extremely unhappy." He decided he would give his dreams a shot, and do his best to make it into university.

He signed up for night classes at a private school, aiming to retake and pass his O-levels. He was then already 28 years old.

His teachers did not make things easy. He recalled: "Teachers are supposed to motivate you, but none of them did that for me. In fact, they took a look at my past results with all the F9s, and they shook their heads. To them, once a failure, always a failure."

To his joy, however, he passed his O-levels, and secured a job as a land survey technician at the Ministry of Law. That success motivated him to aim for his A-levels two years later. Unfortunately, he performed badly, failing to achieve a single credit for any of his papers.

"Mr Abdul: It was a huge blow. Two years of hard work had gone down the drain. It was so tough running from week to night classes, and juggling my homework and studies. I felt so disappointed."

"But I told myself to work harder. I had failed, but this new life that I was leading was much more interesting than my old dull life. I was making progress by being deter mined about what I could achieve than from listening to the advice of others."

On track to success

Refusing to give up, he explored other routes to get to university. He applied and was accepted into an engineering diploma course at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. It was the best decision he ever made.

"The first few months at school, however, were difficult. Mr Abdul Shariff was then in his early 30s, and easily the oldest student in his cohort."

He added: "I had to do something about it, so I would spend all my nights and weekends reading up on the basics of computers, how to open a file, save a file, and so on. I managed to catch up, and I went on to do very well at school."

At the end of three years, Mr Abdul was richly rewarded for his efforts. Out of the 32 courses he took, he scored three distinctions and 21 As. With his new qualifications, he received job offers from SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), foreign businesses, and even multinational corporations.

"But his dream was not yet complete, and he was not about to stop halfway. He worked for a year as a service engineer at an SME, saved up some money and applied to three local universities. Two of them offered him places and he chose SMU."

Give yourself a chance

When Mr Abdul Shariff graduated, he will be 42 years old. He said: "Maybe no one will employ me, but there are always other ways to make it in life. I can set up my own business and become an entrepreneur, for example."

"I always believed that I would achieve my dreams. All I needed was to make the effort and do my best. If I had listened to what others told me, I would never have become what I am today."

Wanting to encourage others to go for their dreams even if they seem unrealistic, he wrote to Life: Mailbag earlier this month to share his story.

"To others who experience difficulties in achieving success, the conventional way, Mr Abdul Shariff has these words of advice. "The world is unpredictable. It’s not for anybody to tell you what you can do, and what you cannot do."

"So give your dreams a shot. Fear of failure is the only thing that will stop you from achieving what you are capable of. But if you don’t try, you will never achieve anything."

Cindy Tong is a freelance writer.