Paddling towards a new life

BY VALERIE TAN

EARLIER this year, a team of 20 paddlers set out on a 200km kayaking expedition off Malaysia’s east coast.

Seventeen Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduates and three ex-offenders, armed with basic paddles and sheer determination, completed the gruelling 10-day journey from Ramunia to Mersing in rough waters off the coast of Johor.

Preparations began in October last year and the students went through a selection process to ensure they had the physical and mental stamina required.

Those chosen had to attend five months of training with the People’s Association Sea Sports Club and bonding sessions with the ex-offenders — Stephen, Don and Jimmy.

SMU student Fortuna Wong, 19, said: “The biggest challenge was securing the participation of the ex-offenders.”

The former offenders had a hard time finding work and didn’t want to take long leave for fear of losing their job.

The expedition was part of an annual SMU community service project called Dare to Dream 2005, led by the Office of Student Life, to break down social barriers.

The aim this year was to help ex-offenders reintegrate into society through the Yellow Ribbon Project. And prove they can be valuable team players.

Former drug offender Stephen, 30, impressed his teammates by volunteering to make repeated trips to help them carry equipment during the expedition in May.

All three ex-offenders bonded wholeheartedly with the students, sharing the darker aspects of their lives.

Friendships were forged and communication made easier, helping the expedition go smoothly.

Stephen, a LaSalle student, artist and video producer, drew a picture of sunset at sea as a parting gift for his teammates.

Don, 20, who works for his family’s business in the marine industry, was described by the students as humble and always thinking of others.

Expedition leader and SMU student Desmond Foo, 23, said: “We want to let the ex-offenders know anything is possible, and they, too, can achieve feats people only dare dream about.”

Jimmy, a 30-year-old who is pursuing a bachelor of business management degree at SMU, said: “All our perceptions about each other changed during the trip. We have shown others that ex-offenders deserve respect for the new individuals they have chosen to be after serving their sentence.”

The writer is a second-year business management student at Singapore Management University.