SMU’s poster boys

Calendar celebrates disabled students' grit

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HAVING made the most of its edgy, competitive side in marketing itself, the Singapore Management University (SMU) is now banking on its “heart-wear” to sharpen this competitive edge.

To this end, it has leveraged on its uniquely diverse student body and democratic admissions criteria to put itself yet again in the public eye with a heart-warming and matching charity calendar where the university’s defining credo is underscored by catchy taglines like “true grit,” “free spirit” and “humility.”

The captions are the work of SMU’s charismatic director of undergraduate admissions, Mr Alan Goh, who says he could not have done it without a lot of help from his colleagues and the advertising agency, Write Angle.

They take on an added significance when one realises that the students “fronting” them are not your everyday icons of achievement — none more so than the brothers Liew, both of whom are stricken with an advanced form of muscular atrophy and their colleague Jimmy Boh Boon Ping, ex-convict and prospective financial regulator.

The older Mr Liew — Chong Choon, 22 — who has just completed his degree course in Business Management, is looking forward to a job at Asia Pacific Breweries, which sponsored the two siblings’ education.

“Although there was no bond, I want to work for them because it is my way of paying back,” he says.

His brother Chong Heng, a third year information systems management student and younger by a year, agrees. “Given a chance we would like to always work together,” he offers shyly. The bond is palpable. So is the courage and grit.

Despite his physical handicap, which makes writing tortuous, Chong Choon topped his class in the O-level exams and both he and Chong Heng are involved in the British Petroleum Mentoring Scheme.

Once a week the two brothers, who are completely wheelchair bound and have only minimal motor ability, give free tuition to secondary school students and conduct leadership workshops. “They are from the normal streams and lack confidence, so we help them gain self-esteem,” says Chong Choon.

That is something not lacking in the Liews, thanks to heroic parents, whose sons are the precious centre of their lives. The senior Mr Liew is a taxi driver who plies his trade only at night so that he can be at home in the daytime to bathe and attend to his two grown-up sons, something their diminutive homemaker mother can no longer do.

For Jimmy Boh, 31, who is in his third year at SMU, being part of SMU’s latest marketing effort — the charity calendar — is another feather in a cap that very nearly became a hood when he was sentenced to eight years in prison for drug peddling in the 1990s.

SMU, he says believed in him and helped him redeem himself in his and society’s eyes. What better way to express one’s gratitude, then, than to appear so revealingly in the university’s calendar. “I’m not afraid to talk about my past because SMU gave me a reason to dream,” said the Singapore Exchange scholar who will be flying for the first time in his life when he goes on an exchange programme next year to the University of British Columbia.

Interestingly, for a calendar that was produced entirely for charity — the Children’s Cancer Foundation — SMU spared nothing in sourcing for the best. Thus the photographs are by Singapore’s most famous celebrity photographer Russell Wong, who reduced his fees significantly for the project.

The calendars, which cost $10 each to produce and 85 per cent of which are sold out, are available on the university website, www.smu.edu.sg. So far SMU has already raised about $52,000 for the CCF.