A SK David Ong what his educational qualifications are, and he’ll proudly tell you that all he has is a certificate from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

He will also tell you that he used to be a ruffian who had trouble relating to people and enjoyed being a public nuisance. But that’s his past, he insists. Today, he makes use of his missteps to motivate undergraduates.

In a recent talk with a group of Singapore Management University (SMU) students, he confesses: "Standing in front of you is a man who only has an ITE (certificate)." "Back then, I felt like I couldn’t communicate with people. But people believed in me, and helped me to step out of my shell. Now, I want to use my life to impact more students for the good of society."

Mr Ong, 33, is an executive director of CampusImpact, a voluntary welfare organisation.

"People believed in me, and helped me to step out of my shell. Now, I want to use my life to impact more students for the good of society." Today, he makes use of his missteps to motivate undergraduates.

His work involves working with local youth in a centre at Block 151 Yishun by conducting courses and camps and providing counselling sessions.

Together with SMU, CampusImpact also sends teams of volunteers for community projects in Cambodia and China.

One team of 15 first-year students, who left last weekend, will be helping to raise awareness of a cafe that provides employment for the hearing impaired.

The cafe is in Dali, a village northwest of the Yunan province. After working with youth for the past 10 years, Mr Ong has become an unlikely role model to the undergraduates despite his background.

When he was a teenager, there were times he got on the wrong side of the law.

Although he was never caught for it, he helped his friends who sold illegal videotapes to store the contraband at his home.

Mr Ong, who works as a youth pastor at a church in Yishun, also told The New Paper that he and his friends were once stopped by the police for being a nuisance to the public.

He said: "We would make fun of people, make a lot of noise and use vulgarity. I don’t think I was a bad person, I just wanted to act ’cool’ (cool) with my friends, so that I could belong to the group."

This, along with his ITE credentials, is why Mr Ong gets nervous sometimes when he is invited by universities here to talk to their students.

"Although I’ve given talks to university students so many times, I still wonder: ‘How can it be? I’m a former ITE boy, now I’m encouraging university students.’

"But I realised that life is more than just having a certificate. They need more than motivation, they need real-life stories. And through my encouragement, I hope that they will feel that ‘if David can do it, we can do it.’"

Mr Ong admits that because he “cannot keep up with technology”, such as instant messaging software like MSN Messenger, he has come up with a trick to help him connect with the tech-savvy youths that he counsels.

He said: "Genuine love and concern keeps me connected to them. Youths always talk to me about MSN. But I’ll joke with them that I don’t know anything about MSN, I only know about M&M chocolates.

"Youths today have the TV and the Internet. But they lack encouragement. I wish to be part of their lives, I want to be the person who pushes them up.”

Mr Xander Leong, 22, who is leading the team to Dali, said: "David’s life experiences, rather than his qualifications, are really what inspire us. He stepped out of his comfort zone, and stigma, and is truly an example to follow.”

Agreeing, first year economics student Benjamin Chen, 22, who is the facilitator for the trip, said: "Having these talks with David helps in my character development. Grades don’t count for what’s really in a person.

"I’m going to apply what David taught me today by being flexible when I’m in Yunan, and also to handle problems objectively."

And it is feedback like this that helps keep Mr Ong going.

"When I see some of the youth, I see myself in them,” he said. "Everyone has a bright future, even if they come from ITE. Everyone’s a future star. Like me, they just need someone to stand in front of them and tell them: ‘You can make it.’"