Once, he was a drug pusher who was wanted by the Central Narcotics Bureau. Now he is a Singapore Exchange (SGX) scholar working there full-time as an operations executive, earning more than $3,000 a month.

In 1998, he was sentenced to eight years and five strokes of the cane for his drug-related crimes.

Today, he will graduate from the Singapore Management University (SMU) within the top 35 per cent of his cohort.

Mr Jimmy Boh, 33, now has a double degree in business management and accountancy.

He said: "The overwhelming desire to survive and prove to others that I can do well is why I am here today." It's hard to believe that the well-spoken man, dressed in shirt and tie and working in the posh SGX office in Shenton Way, peddled drugs 12 years ago.

Things began going wrong for him after he was expelled from polytechnic in 1992.

"I couldn't focus on studying and I didn't attend classes for three months so they expelled me."

Then 17, he wanted to make as much money as possible. He became a dispatch rider by day and a bar waiter by night.

Four years later, he started dabbling in marijuana and began peddling it as well. With the drug peddling and two jobs he claimed he was raking in about $6,000 a month.

"It was an expensive habit so I started peddling to feed the habit."

He sank deeper and deeper into the hole and although his parents and two brothers tried to help him, he ignored them.

LIVING ON THE EDGE

In 1997, he moved out of his family home into a rented apartment.

"I was living on the edge, running away from my problems. I did not want to face the inevitable," he recalled.

He was arrested in July 1998.

"I felt both a sense of doom and relief," he said.

But his personal pain was just beginning. In 1999, while in jail, his mother was dying of a blood disorder.

He recalled: "I was sitting in the prison yard when an officer came to deliver the bad news that my mother was seriously ill."

"I went to see her in the hospital and I was with her for only 29 minutes. "I told her I will change and that she should go in peace and not worry about me anymore."

She died later that day. Her death was a major catalyst for him to change.

Months later, he signed up for A-levels in prison and began a rigorous regimen of self-studying. He spent about six to eight hours a day studying.

He did reasonably well for his A levels (one A, two Bs and one D, as well as an A1 for Mandarin and a B3 for English) while still in prison.

Because of his good conduct, he was released after five years and four months.

He spent the last year of his term helping out at the Kaki Bukit Prison School where he taught and counselled inmates and organised activities.

He got accepted into National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and SMU in 2004, and chose SMU.

STIGMA

At the age of 29, he was 10 years older than the girls and eight years older than the boys who started with him.

He had to bear the stigma of being an ex-convict.

"I knew it wasn't going to be easy but I decided to be open about it with the people I met."

In the first year, he made it to the Dean's List and decided to apply for a SGX scholarship.

"I didn't think I could get it because of my criminal past. But I wanted to prove that even ex-convicts can get scholarships."

He went through four rounds of interviews and was finally offered the scholarship.

He was given $30,000 for his tuition fee.

The people around him have been impressed with his achievements and motivation.

His professor Tan Tock Meng, 61, who selected Mr Boh to be his teaching assistant for two years, said: "I knew he was an ex-convict, but he was very mature and driven and I think his achievements are fantastic."

"Even after achieving so much, Mr Boh doesn't think he has arrived yet. He said: "I still have a long way to go. The finale of my story is still not finished. I have so much more to do."