He earned his place in SMU while in prison

Former gangster, who is set to get a double degree, wins National Youth Council award

REPORT: VEENA BHARWANI

TEN years ago, he was carrying choppers and was involved in gang fights.

Today, David Thorairajan Manickam, 28, is a far cry from his previous self – he’s a third-year double major student at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

He’s on the cusp of graduating with a degree in Psychology and Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource.

This ex-offender has come a long way since his gang-fighting days.

For his tenacity in beating the odds and his perseverance to lead a better life, he received the Stars of Shine award from the National Youth Council on July 24.

The award recognizes outstanding young people aged between 15 and 35 who have overcome personal struggles to make significant contributions to the community.

Worked hard

Said Mr Thorairajan: “I wanted a future for myself, so I worked hard to get to where I am today.”

Recalling his past, he said that he was lured into the violent world of gangs at 15.

“Being in a gang meant I had a sense of belonging. I thought they’d look out for me.”

But his world became a blur of fight after fight. As a result, his school work suffered; he repeated his Secondary 3 year twice.

He first went to jail in April 2000 for gang-related offences.

But once he came out in December 2001, his violence took a nasty turn – he stabbed someone from a rival gang.

“I was just very angry. My best friend was stabbed before that and the only thing on my mind was revenge,” he said.

He was sentenced to 6½ years in jail for gang-related offences in 2002.

That was when it hit him: He was on the threshold of wasting several years of his life and he didn’t even have an N-level certificate. And he was already 21.

He said: “That’s when I realised, I had to turn my life around. I had been wasting my time. I wanted my future back.”

He started studying voraciously in prison under the guidance of teachers.

He said: “I even gave up three hours of free time that we had to go in the yard to study. I studied for about three hours on weekdays and the whole day on weekends.”

His hard work paid off.

During his prison years, he did well in N-levels in 2005, scored five distinctions for his O levels a year later, and went on to do his A levels, scoring five Bs.

From a gang member, he had also transformed into a role model for others.

Student leader

While serving his sentence at Kaki Bukit Centre (Prison School), he became a student leader for the Rotary Community Corps (RCC) in 2007, spearheading a group of students in planning and organizing events for the inmates.

Mr Thorairajan said: “That was my watershed moment, I knew I’d have a future.”

In one of Mr Thorairajan’s more memorable moments in 2006, the then interim dean of the School of Social Sciences at SMU Mr David Chua paid him a visit in prison, to assess if he was a suitable candidate to join SMU.

Mr Chua, who is now the deputy provost at SMU, said that his decision to interview a potential student in prison may sound unusual for some, but not for him.

On giving the second chance, he said: “We are glad that David has proven himself and we hope that his case will highlight not only the importance of effective rehabilitation programmes in the prison but also the role that we in the community play in providing opportunities for ex-offenders to renew and restart their lives.”

In the two years that Mr Thorairajan has been out of prison, he has been involved with the Architects of Life programme which works with youths-at-risk and conducts motivational and educational programmes for schools.

He added: “I use my life as an ex-offender to tell young people that they can turn their lives around too. I want to inspire others to realise that if I can do this, they can do it too.”