From a PSLE score of 181 to NUS Medicine

Theresa Tan

Mr Tan Jun Xiang, 22, is not your typical medical student who aced all his school examinations. In fact, he scored only 181 points in the PSLE and had to go into the five-year Normal stream in secondary school.

So the polytechnic graduate, who made it to the prestigious medicine faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS), is among the rare few who do not fit the mould. When he was younger, he never thought he would go to university—much less the highly competitive Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS, where only about one in seven applicants get in. So what sparked his stunning academic turnaround?

A few things: seeing how disappointed his parents were with his results, getting into the secondary school of his choice, and discovering that he could indeed do well if he put his mind to it. The elder of three children, Mr Tan was a disinterested pupil at Anderson Primary School who never scored an A. He was more interested in playing on his Game Boy, a hand-held videogaming device.

"I am a very forgetful person and studying was not my thing," he said. "I only flipped through my textbooks a day before my PSLE." He was unmotivated by poor scores until he saw how much it disappointed his parents, a sales manager and an aviation security officer. He was also posted to a school that was not of his choice.

But Ang Mo Kio Secondary gave him a chance after his parents appealed for a place there. It was the school to which he had wanted to go and that acceptance marked the start of his path to academic success.

"If I did not want to waste the chance I had been given, it was obvious," he said.

So the Normal (Academic) student started to pay attention in class. He was diligent about homework and asked his teachers about material he did not understand.

He tried hard because he wanted to get into the school’s through-train programme, which allowed him to take the O levels in Secondary 3, instead of the N levels first in Sec 4 and the O levels a year later.

Said Mr Tan: "My teachers did not treat us like lower Normal (Academic) students, but pushed us to do better.”

He graduated at the top of his school cohort, scoring nine points for his O levels.

That gained him a place in the “highly competitive” biomedical science faculty at Singapore Polytechnic. Mr Ang and Professor T.J. O’Riordan said biomedical science is one of its more popular courses.

While pursuing his diploma, he realized through an internship at a hospital that he was fascinated by the human body and intrigued by the multitude of diseases. He enjoyed talking to people and also wanted to understand patients’ concerns and fears.

He realised that he wanted to be a doctor.

It was a lofty goal, considering that about 2,000 top students fight for 300 places at the NUS medical school each year. But he applied anyway and was accepted last year.

"It was beyond my wildest dreams to get in," he said. "My father burst into tears at a restaurant and invited my relatives to come celebrate.”

Mr Tan, who is in the second year of a five-year degree course, was initially apprehensive that he would have nothing in common with the other students, who went from top schools or more privileged backgrounds.

His father’s highest qualification is an O-level certificate, while his mother has A-levels.

He need not have worried, for he found that he was able to make friends.

American Professor T.J. O’Riordan, the school’s head of the department of anatomy, taught Mr Tan and praised his academic performance.

"Very clever," he said. "He was respectful, attentive and showed a positive attitude in his studies. I am sure he will continue to excel in his studies and become a role model for the aspiring medical generation.”

Mr Tan said: “Everyone was very surprised that my PSLE score was only 181 points and they were intrigued by how I made it to medicine.

"I tell others: Don’t give up, just aim high and don’t compare yourself to others. You will never know what may happen.”

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