

# EDUCATION

## Teen rebel now graduating with top honours

Concern for sick mum sparked turnaround while he was at ITE; he went on to poly and then NTU

Isabelle Liew

In his teenage years, he was a troublemaker who got into fights, talked back to teachers and mixed with bad company. Sporting shoulder-length hair and tattoos, Mr Edwin Tan was on the verge of going down the wrong path.

But his concern for his mother, who had many health issues but soldiered on as the family's sole breadwinner, helped pull him back from the brink.

While he was in the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), he decided to turn over a new leaf and vowed to study hard.

Today, Mr Tan, 30, graduates from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with an Honours (Highest Distinction) degree in electrical and electronic engineering.

Recounting his turning point during his second semester of Higher Nitec in ITE, Mr Tan told The Straits Times: "My mother had to undergo a lot of operations because of heart issues. She looked so frail and I thought, I'm not a child anymore, and at that point there were only two routes I could take – the right path and wrong path. I wanted to do something to make her proud, and to support her."

"So I studied hard and when I got better grades, the sense of achievement drove me to do better."

His parents separated when he was in Secondary 2, and his mother, who was a senior patient associate at a hospital, became the sole bread-

winner for him and his older sister. She also underwent a kidney transplant. That was around the time Mr Tan started being rebellious.

His mother, Madam Toh Mai Wong, 65, said: "When he was being rebellious, I would always cry in front of him, and tell him if he doesn't work hard, how can he support himself when I leave the world one day."

"I would tell him not to waste his time in school. But in ITE, he really started working hard and putting in effort."

Mr Tan did well enough in ITE to get into Singapore Polytechnic to take up a diploma in electrical and electronic engineering, after completing national service. While in polytechnic, he had to juggle his studies with caring for his mother as she was frequently ill.

He graduated with a diploma with merit. Even then, he did not think of

going to university, and spent two years working as an assistant superintendent in the offshore industry.

"I never considered going to university. Going to a polytechnic was already a dream for me when I was in ITE, and I thought my limit was just a diploma. When I graduated from polytechnic, I was already 24, and I needed to support my mother so I thought, just go out to work."

His colleagues encouraged him to apply for university, and he eventually got accepted directly into the second year at NTU, taking up bursaries to pay his tuition fees.

After two years of working, it took a while for Mr Tan to get used to studying again. "The first time I stepped into a physics lecture hall, I didn't understand what the lecturer was teaching," he said.

"I knew I had to catch up with the rest of my coursemates, who were younger than me. Every day, I stayed back in the library to study."

In March this year, when Mr Tan landed a job as a project engineer in the civil sector, he told his mother to retire.

He said: "I'm grateful that I took the correct path, although I took longer than my peers who are the same age as me – they have been working for many years already but I am only just starting."

"But I tell myself to continue setting goals, be determined and push my limits at my own pace."

Said Madam Toh: "He's always very apologetic that I had to delay my retirement, but I'm very proud of him that he got to where he is now, so it's all worth it."

"He would give me a lot of moral support and encourage me through the times I was very ill. I pulled through because of him."

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### BEYOND HIS DREAMS

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**MR EDWIN TAN**, who graduates from Nanyang Technological University with an Honours (Highest Distinction) degree in electrical and electronic engineering.



Mr Edwin Tan is graduating from Nanyang Technological University with an Honours (Highest Distinction) degree in electrical and electronic engineering. When he started working this year, he told his mother, who has many health problems, to retire.

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