A Different Kind of Impact

On 11 September 2001, one of our BEng graduates witnessed the second plane crash into the World Trade Center in New York. He was barely meters away from “Ground Zero” in his stock-broking office, and 15,000 km from Singapore. As he evacuated his building, he looked back just in time to see the first tower collapse... and as the impending danger dawned quickly upon him, he began the race to get ahead of the enveloping dust of possible death. “...And I understood fear for the first time”, said Gavin Ying Chuan. After an anxious week of waiting, Associate Professor Michael Heng was relieved when he received Gavin’s reply to his email sent after the incident. Recently home for a short vacation, Gavin readily agreed to share his experiences since graduation with the EEE Alumni and students.

E3World: What has happened since you graduated?
Gavin: I graduated in June 1996 with a concentration in Communication Engineering. I worked for Singapore Broadcasting Authority as a Management Executive for two years before going to the States for my MBA. After obtaining the MBA, I worked for ETG, a proprietary trading firm in downtown Manhattan. The office is in a building just next to the WTC site. In this job, I speculated on stocks and options on a short-term basis with the firm’s capital and I was compensated with a percentage of profits from my monthly Profit & Loss position.

E3World: Why have you chosen this career path?
Gavin: I wanted a job that was fast paced, dynamic and competitive. Trading definitely encompasses all that. I also wanted a job that closely links rewards and performance. In trading, it doesn’t matter how much you schmooze or even the amount of time you put in your work. Only the bottom-line counts and I like that. I take full responsibility for all the mistakes I make but I also reap all the rewards too.

E3World: What have you learnt during these times?
Gavin: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy”, said Martin Luther King, Jr. Making a career change and going after my dreams has not been an easy endeavour. There were a lot of bumps along the road and many times I felt like giving up. But this quote inspired me to look fear in the face and try to gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience.

E3World: In your opinion, what kind of impact have you made?
Gavin: I think we make an impact on everyone whom we come in contact with whether we like it or not. My greatest hero is not some CEO of a company or the entrepreneur of the year etc. The people who make the greatest impact on my life are always people I know, eg. Professor Heng. He’s someone who imparts wisdom to me, someone who wants to bring out the best in me and genuinely believes that I have what it takes to succeed. And I want to do the same for others. I believe I have impacted on those around me just by getting into their lives and helping them in whatever way I can. It is indeed better to give than to receive.

E3World: What training during your EEE course has helped you the most since your graduation?
Gavin: Since I am in a completely different field now, technically speaking, none of the engineering knowledge I gained really helped me. I suppose the rigorousness of the BEng course has taught me a lot about perseverance and mental discipline, and that goes a long way for me.

E3World: What other subjects or training at the University would have helped to prepare you better for the past years?
Gavin: I think the curriculum has changed substantially since I graduated. The courses I had were almost purely engineering subjects and I was given little flexibility to take other courses in say business or philosophy. I think what would have helped are courses on presentation skills, entrepreneurship and something really different like philosophy. The fact of the matter is: most people do not use a lot of the knowledge that they acquired in school. Skills that would last a lifetime, such as critical thinking skills, creativity and presentation skills should be emphasized.

E3World: By venturing 15,000 km from Singapore, you have acted very differently from many of your classmates. What encouragement could you give to EEE students in general, and the Final Year students in particular?
Gavin: If one does not know to which port [one] is sailing, no wind is favorable. Said Seneca. This statement is so true! I would really encourage the final year students to thoroughly explore where their real passion lies. Talk to a lot of people, and find out which job suits your goals in life. I hope it’s not just about the money. And once you have set your mind on something, pursue it with all your heart. I once heard this from a friend. Of all the students who graduate from a prestigious acting school, less than ten percent will end up with an acting career in Hollywood. Most often, those who get the job are not necessarily the most talented. They were the ones who wanted it badly enough to persevere through all the doors that were slammed in their faces.

Also, do not stop learning. I am now doing another Masters degree, this time in Mathematical Finance with Columbia University, in order to remain sharp-edged and relevant for a future that will be fraught with many exciting uncertainties.

E3World: Any comments you wish to share with the EEE Alumni?
Gavin: I think the School is doing a great job in keeping the alumni connected through this E3World magazine. I hope that we would make full use of this resource to network, share our experiences and learn from one another.