'I owe my life to education'

Prof Lim Chong Yan learnt early on that a good education is surest passport to a better life. – 67

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He LOST his mother at eight. By 12, the sorry boy was working as a farmer, planting padi, tappae and vegetables to supplement his shopkeeper-father's meagre income.

And by 14, he would wake up at dawn to peddle fruitfully down the streets of Malacca, his boyhood, delivering fruit from dawn till late. He shaved across dawn's quiet. The few cents he earned daily helped pay his school fees.

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The story of how 14-year-old Lim Chong Yan, 77, about marketing, distribution and credit, is the foundation for the boy in the bamboo hat.

The biggest lesson he learned during that stint at the university of hard knocks is that a good education is the surest passport to a better life.

To help ensure that no student derives himself a quality education because he cannot afford the fees, Professor Lim, who served as director-general of the Ministry of Economics at Harvey Technological University (NCTU), approached the university in late 2007 with the idea of a bursary fund.

He made a personal donation of $120,000 to kick-start the Lim Chong Yan Bursary Fund. The university soon adopted Prof Lim's cause as its own, launching a high-profile campaign for accessibility to Higher Education to support needy students for many years.

The money will go to several bursaries, including the one named after Prof Lim, and help support about 120 students every year.

To qualify, students must be enrolled in undergraduate courses at the university and come from families with a household per capita income of $1,700 or less per month.

By last week, more than 2,000 donors had contributed $5.2 million towards the campaign. With a dollar-for-dollar top-up for Governor-General Sir Michael, the campaign badly needs only $310,000, including $1.4 million for the Lim Chong Yan Bursary Fund.

Its donor includes Prof Lim's elder daughter, lawyer Lim Suei Fern, who donated $200,000.

The economist was honoured for his passion for the underprivileged at a dinner organized by the university last week. Speaking at the event, President Suu Kyi said that Prof Lim's interest in the students went far beyond their grades.

He has a deep concern for these young people, and has often gone out of his way to make sure that students in difficult circumstances have the help they need to succeed in life," she said. "For Prof Lim, who has lost seven children and seven grandchildren, says, when you plant some trees, you like to see them flower and bear fruit, don't you? I'm a gardener. When I plant trees, I must make sure they all grow and do not wither.

He realized the importance of education very early in life. He recalls covering in honey and watching dozens ofирован rubber tappers stare to death during the Japanese Occupation in the early 1940s. The Occupation started when he was only 10.

'I saw them burning before my own eyes, hopeless. So I felt I had to study and move beyond despair.'

After the Occupation, he worked hard and studied, taught himself French and won a Malacca Settlement Scholarship to study at the University of Malaya, then located in Singapore.

Without that break, he reckons he would have never been chosen as an ideal recruit for the Malayan Communist Party to fight the British in the 1969 Malayan conflict.

'I would have been shot dead in no time. So I owe my life to education.'

But such scholarships are not easy to come by in Singapore, since they are reserved only for the cream of the crop, unlike in good Western universities.

'To Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge, every student is a scholar. That's how it should be too, says Prof Lim, pointing out that only 20 out of 100,000 of China's primary school children eventually enrol in one of the three government-funded universities here. So every student is worthy of merit.'

The idea for the fund is not new. He says that in many great universities of the world, such as Harvard and Yale, students often have to work to save money to pay for their education.

At Harvard University, for instance, to get in, is, a decent first class education simply because his family cannot support him," says Prof Lim. 'That to me is a great idea - and the genesis of our own bursary fund.'

The idea was reinforced when he met the French Ambassador at a university convocation here a few years ago. The latter told him that he came from a humble home and that his higher education at a prestigious university in France was only possible after a student-sponsored bursary scheme.

'That, too, gave me the encouragement that we needed a needs-based scholarship fund,' says Prof Lim who, in the early 1980s, also set up the Students Emergency Fund at NCTU, which offered help to students in times of crisis, such as the sudden announcement of a layoff to a family member.

Life is normally a smooth passage. So beautiful. But sometimes we get into troubles, he says.

He recalls a young Singaporean student who told her professor a few years ago that she had to drop out of university because her two-driver father had died in an accident. She had to go to work to support her homemaker mother and two younger siblings.

Prof Lim leaned the $10,000 salary for taking individual cases and the fund paid the student what she needed - he has forgotten the exact amount. He is happy for her and continues her education.

'Every good and hardworking student deserves to graduate,' he says.

The money for the Emergency Fund came from fees the professor earned from speaking engagements and royalties from his books.

The fund also helped him from a personal predicament. Many of the books he wrote were useful for his students. But it was not 'proper' to recommend his own books to students, since he would receive royalties.

'With the fund, I could say you need this book and the royalty will go to the Students Emergency Fund. So I had no hesitation to laugh,' he said.

Prof Lim does not remember how much he has personally contributed to the fund so far. The fund is still in existence, but it has not been taken over by the university. Over the past decade, around 20 students have been helped.

Meanwhile, the Lim Chong Yan Bursary Fund has also begun disbursing aid to needy students.

One of Professor Lim's student, third-year economics major Soh Young Feng, 33, is one of the fund's first recipients.

The son of a hawk and housewife worked part-time as a librarian and private tutor to help pay the 10 per cent of fees that his bank loan does not cover.

The $4,800 he still receives as a bursary will ensure that he does not need to work to pay his fees.

'So I have no hesitation to tell him that I want to pay my fees,' he says.

He adds that the professor often enquires students to devote their time to helping others.

'So I hope that once he graduates and gets a good job, he wants to begin contributing to the bursary fund. I have been helped so much. It's only natural that I want to pay it forward.'