few my life to education’

Mc LIM Chong Yah
Prof’s big push for needy students
people • PRIME • PAGE A30

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Prof Lim Chong Yah learned early on that a good education is surest passport to a better life

T he LOST his mother at eight. By 12, the scrappy boy was working as a farmer, planting padi, tapioca and vegetables to help his family keep the family’s meagre income.

He would wake at dawn to paddle furiously down the streets of Malacca, delivering fresh bread from bakeries to coffee shops and delivering school books he had soldly helped pay his school fees.

The job taught him to economize, delivering fresh bread from bakeries to coffee shops and delivering school books he had soldly helped pay his school fees.

The job taught economist Lim Chong Yah, now 77, about marketing, distribution and credit, laying the foundations for the subject in which he excelled and still teaches more than 60 years on.

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

To help ensure that no student denies himself a quality education because he cannot afford the fees, Professor Lim, who serves as the Albert Wensinck Chair Professor of Economics at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), approached the university in late 2007 with the idea of a bursary fund.

He made a personal donation of $100,000 to kick-start the Lim Chong Yah Bursary Fund. The university soon adopted Prof Lim’s cause as its own, launching a high-wattage Campaign for Accessibility to higher education, which raised the initial $1 million

It funds for needy students.

The money was all given to several bursaries, including the one named after Prof Lim, and help support about 220 students every year.

In NTU, students must be enrolled in undergraduate courses at the university, with family house- hold per capita income of $1,700 or less per month.

By last week, more than 2,000 donors had contributed $1.2 million towards the campaign. With a dollar-for-dollar top-up by the Government, the campaign now stands at $3.2 million, including $1.5 million for the Lim Chong Yah Bursary Fund.

He donates Prof Lim’s other daughter, lawyer Lim Sue Fen, who gave $100,000.

The economist was shocked for his passion for the underprivileged at a dis- nurser organized by the university last week.

Speaking at the event, NTU president Su Guanda pointed out that Prof Lim’s interest in his 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 difficul- tly by 14, knows she that they need,” said Dr Su.

“His son has four 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 grow and are with- out any need to water or fertilize them.”

He realised the importance of education very early in life. He recalls coveting in fear and watching dozens of raged rubber tappers starve to death during the Japanese Occupation in Malacca for the earl- 1940s. The Occupation started when he was barely 10.

“I saw them dying before my own eyes. Helpless. So I felt I had to study and move beyond farming.”

After the Occupation, he worked and studied hard, taught himself English and won a Malaysia Settlement Scholarship to study at the University of Malaya, then lo- cated in Singapore.

Without that break, he reckons he would have been an ideal recruit for the Malayan Communist Party to fight the British in the dense Malaysian jungle.

“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 re- served only for the cream of the crop, unlike in good Western universities.

In Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge, every student is a scholar. That’s how it should be here too,” says Prof Lim, pointing out that currently, only about 25 per cent of each Primary 1 student cohort eventually enrolls in one of the three govern- ment-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, stu- dents do not have to worry about school fees.

“At Harvard University, for instance, no student, once he gets in, is denied a first-class education simply because his family cannot support him,” says Prof Lim, “That is one of the great ideas — and the genesis of our own bursary fund.”

The idea was reinforced when he attended a university convocation ceremony a few years ago. The lat- ter told him that he came from a humble home and that his higher education at a prestigious university in France had been supported by a university-sponsored burs- ary scheme.

Growing up in poverty

PROFESSOR Lim Chong Yah was born in Malacca in 1932. In 1951, he won a Malaysia Settlement Scholarship to study economics at the University of Malaya in Singapore. He also holds a doctorate from Oxford University, which he did on a British Commonwealth Scholarship.

His main aim was to help eradicate global poverty. As the child of an impoverished store-keeper, he learned first-hand the difficulties of growing up in poverty.

He is perhaps best known as the founding chairman of the National Wages Council from 1972 to 2003. He is also the author of two As-level economics textbooks, Elements Of Economic Theory and Economic Structure And Organisation.

He was with the Singapore

Administrative Service from 1955 to 1991 and began lecturing at the Department of Economics and Statistics at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and is now the Albert Wensinck Chair Professor of Economics at Nanyang Technological University.

Prof Lim is married to former teacher Nani Lim and they have two sons and two daughters.

His hobbies include golf, gardening and writing poetry. He is also known to quote poetry while teaching economics.

His elder daughter, lawyer Lim Sue Fen, is married to Mr Lee Hsien Yang, chairman of Fraser & Neave and son of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

“That’s, too, gave me the encourage- ment that we needed a needs-based schol- arship fund,” says Prof Lim who, in the early 1960s, also set up the Students Emergency Fund at NTU, which offered help to students in times of crisis, such as the death of a breadwinner in the family.

“This is normally a smooth passage. So beautiful. But sometimes we get into trou- ble,” he says.

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

Prof Lim waived the $10,000 offering for individual cases and the fund paid the student whatever she needed — he has forgotten the exact amount — to top up her fees and complete 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 liberate him from a personal predicament. Many of the books he wrote were useless for his stu- dents. But it was “not proper” to recomm- end his own books to students, since he would receive royalties.

“With the fund, I could say you read this book and the royalty will go to the Students Emergency Fund. So I had no vested interest,” he laughs.

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

Meanwhile, the Lim Chong Yah Bursa- ry Fund has also begun disbursing aid to needy students.

One of Prof Lim’s students, third year economics major Soh Yong Sing, 25, is one of the fund’s first recipients. The son of a house wife and housewife worked part-time as a librarian and pri- vate tutor to help pay the $10 part-time fees that his bank loan does not cover.

The $4,000 he will receive as a bursa- ry will ensure that he does not need to work to pay his fees.

Mr Soh hopes to become a civil serv- ant and “wants policies that impact peo- ple’s lives.” The financial help made him confident that he will one day achieve his dream.

“As a student, I have learnt a lot from Prof Lim — not only about economics, but also about giving,” he says.

He adds that the professor often ex- horts students to devote their time to helping others.

So he says 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.”

If you would like to contribute to the Lim Chong Yah Bursary Fund, you can do so by sending a cheque made payable to Nanyang Technological University at NUS, or by sending an e-mail message to annualgiving@ntu.edu.sg