The goal keeper

HIS BIGGEST KICK: Once worried he may never walk again, Lai Wei Chiang now plays football whenever he can.
Once bed-ridden by a rare form of cancer, this young man has bounced back and now owns one of Singapore's biggest tuition agencies.

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

Wong Kim Hoh

In his scruffy jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt, Lai Wei Chang blends right in with the undergraduate crowd chilling out in the Science faculty canteen at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Unlike many of them, however, the third year Physics major does not depend on his parents for an allowance. He does not need to, not when he is the founder of several businesses including ManyTutors.com, one of Singapore's biggest tuition agencies.

What's even more remarkable is the fact that the 25-year-old started these enterprises under the most dire of circumstances - when he was undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy sessions after being diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer.

Swigging from a bottle of Chinese herbal tea, he recalls the shock two years ago when doctors told him he had Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare disease where cancer cells are found in the bone or soft tissue. It affects two people in every million - mostly children and young adults - and is found almost exclusively in Caucasians.

The diagnosis came when he was enjoying his first semester break during his first year at NUS in 2004.

"I was suffering from backaches for about a month. I thought I had a slipped disc," recalls the elder of two sons of a marketing manager and a housewife.
The pain became so excruciating that he had to be confined to bed. “I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t get up, I couldn’t even turn my body.”

Initial visits to doctors didn’t help. Eventually, an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan – done after he started losing feeling in his legs – revealed a big tumour. Part of it was sitting on his spinal cord, part of it was near his kidney.

He had an operation, which lasted more than six hours, to have the tumour removed from his spine. “After the operation, I couldn’t feel my legs. Apparently the doctors had told my father that it might be five years or even more before I could walk again.”

He had to undergo gruelling physiotherapy sessions to regain the use of his limbs.

“I took just one month to walk again. I told myself I had to walk again,” says Lai, pride swelling in his voice even as tears start filling his eyes at the memory.

But more bad news followed. A biopsy revealed that the tumour was malignant. He underwent three chemotherapy sessions to shrink the remaining tumour before it was taken out in a second operation. It didn’t end there.

“After the second operation, I had three more chemotherapy sessions and three weeks of daily radiotherapy sessions,” he says.

His voice breaking, he adds: “When you know you’re going to die, you suddenly realise how precious life is. You really want to fight because you really want to live.”

Quietly, he lets on: “You can’t believe how happy I was to go back home and see my own room. I never thought I’d see it again.”

It was in his room at his family’s Loyang Valley condominium that he started working out the details for his first venture – ManyTutors.com – with his girlfriend Tan Yiru, 23, and another partner. His girlfriend now helps him run his businesses.

Lai had hit upon the idea of starting an online tuition agency – one which offers an electronic database of both students seeking tuition and tutors – while he was studying for his diploma in electronic engineering at the Singapore Polytechnic some years back.

Then 17 years old, he could not realise his plan because a person needs to be aged 21 and above to register a business.

He says: “But after my operations, I told my partner: ‘Let’s do this, I’m free now’. I didn’t have anything to lose and, let’s face it, I may never have another chance to do it again. My parents were very supportive.”

Then bald from his chemotherapy treatment, he remembers donning a cap and going to a bank to open a business account with his partner.

Each of them put in $2,500.

“I put in another telephone line in my bedroom, and I remember starting the business there, taking calls, working on the database. We were one of the pioneers when we went online, we came up with ideas like posting tuition assignments in a web forum.”

Today, ManyTutors.com has an 400 sq ft office in Paya Lebar, and hires eight people to handle a business volume worth more than $100,000 a year.

Lai, who took a year off his studies at
NUS to undergo treatments, did not stop there. He started several other businesses. These include Pinkcubc, a website design business, and narutofever.com, a website dedicated to Japanese anime. Advertising revenue for the latter can hit four figures each month.

While recuperating, he also started an online shop dealing in toys but cheekily declines to give details “because there are no entry barriers and I don’t want competitors”.

Not all the ventures he started during this period took off. One was the Neighbourhood Health Directory which gave detailed listings of clinics and hospitals all over Singapore.

“We printed 20,000 copies. I was undergoing radiotherapy then but I remember knocking on doors of HDB shops, trying to canvass advertising. But it was too much work for too little money.”

His illness, he says, has changed him.

“In the past, I used to be scared of rejection and failure. Now, I don’t even think about it. I would just go out and do it if I wanted to try something.”

He adds: “If you gave me the choice between a windfall of a million dollars and the chance to start something, I will choose the latter. It’s the experience of doing something and seeing it bear fruit which is more valuable.”

Lai, who has a medical checkup every six months and an MRI scan every three, admits his illness still haunts him.

“I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, worried that it might recur. Everytime I have aches, I will become paranoid.”

He says: “You know, I play soccer every chance I get these days. When I was con-
fined to bed, I was so worried that I could never run again.”

His enterprising spirit has not left him since he returned to his studies. Just a few months ago, he set up a retail cart in Cathay Cineleisure, specialising in anime toys. It has done so well that he has applied to do the same at Bugis Junction and Tampines Mall.

“I want to start a whole chain,” says the soft-spoken young man, who adds that he ploughs back all his earnings – he modestly says it is a few thousand dollars each month – into the businesses.

Lai, who’s also one of the founders of the blog Singapore Entrepreneurs, laughs at suggestions that he’s a budding entrepreneur.

“I’m just someone who sees an opportunity and makes some profits out of it. A real entrepreneur is someone who does something which brings value to the world.”

He’s not discounting that he will do just that one day.

“Right now, I have plans for a website which is radically new. I can’t go into details but it will affect the way you read or gather news about the people around you.”

He hopes to pour $30,000 into the venture. If it takes off, “I hope it will affect humanity the same way that Google affects humanity”.

He then smiles and quietly says: “I’ve learnt one thing about myself from all this. I don’t have plans for the biggest this or the best that. I know that whatever I set out to do, I will get there... someday.”

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