

A CHANGE OF HEART

From rebel to role model

After a troubled childhood, this young man is helping other at-risk youth take a leap of faith with the help of Sunbeam Place

BY NICHOLAS LIM

SINGAPORE – Like any Singaporean son, 21-year-old John* is about to enrol for National Service after graduating from polytechnic a few months ago. It may sound like the story of a typical Singapore youth, but just nine years earlier, John's future appeared bleak.

While most 12-year-olds would have been preoccupied with their PSLE examination preparations, John skipped two months of school when he was in Primary 6 due to difficulties he was experiencing at home.

At the time, his mother suffered from a severe mental condition that required her to be hospitalised. She is now in a care centre and can go out if she's accompanied.

John was never close to his father, who was largely absent from his life. His father was unable to give the family financial security and often changed jobs.

His older sister, who was in Secondary 2 then, was his pillar of strength and the siblings shared a very close bond since they were young.

IN SEARCH OF FRIENDSHIP

In school, however, he felt none of his friends could relate to the issues he was facing at home.

"I remembered growing up, teachers would usually ask: 'Who is your hero?'"

"Most of my friends would say either their mother or their father. I would think of a superhero and they would laugh at me," he said.

As time went by, he chose the easier option of shutting out his friends instead of sharing his problems. "I didn't think they would have understood," he said.

"I would often think about when my father would be coming home and why my family was different from others. Even though I was interested in my studies, I did not have the mood or the heart to pursue it."

Convinced that the PSLE was the least of his worries, John skipped school for two months.

His primary school brought his case to attention of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), who in turn referred him to Sunbeam Place, which then became his new home.



After a troubled childhood, John has become a role model for the younger children at Sunbeam Place. PHOTO: ONG ZE TENG

Sunbeam Place is a residential home and place of safety for children who have been abused and neglected and are in need of protection, or whose parents are unable to provide proper care for them.

Despite the tough circumstances, John's PSLE grades were good enough for him to enroll in the Express Stream in secondary school.

When he first entered SCS, John had trouble opening up to the social workers as well as his fellow residents. "I have always been an introvert. But it got better as time went by," he said.

It was also initially hard for John to adapt to life at Sunbeam Place. He was given a strict curfew of 8pm every day and there were restrictions on the use of electronic devices. He said: "When I was at

— he was two to four years older than most of them and they had already been living there longer than him.

John's mother and sister would visit whenever they could, but over time, it was the social workers and case workers at Sunbeam Place who provided the emotional and social support that he yearned for.

OPENING UP TO CHANGE

Over the years, Sunbeam Place turned out to be more than just a foster home for John. Through a series of programmes, as well as the support of the social workers, John matured into a responsible young man.

"It was not a particular event or any one person that sparked the change in me. It was the little gestures and small deeds that added up," John said.

Ms Rachael Tan, who is now the Director of the Student Service Hub at Singapore Children's Society, was one of the social workers who left a lasting impression during John's initial years at Sunbeam Place. "I was doing badly in Chemistry in Secondary 3. I was the last in my cohort. When Ms Tan found out about it, she found a chemistry tutor for me," said John.

"This means a lot to me as I seldom talk about my problems, hence I would not have taken the initiative to ask for help."

John went on to do well in his GCE O-Level examination and even scored an A2 for his Combined Science (Physics and Chemistry). He applied for a graphic design course in a polytechnic. However, he changed his course of study in his first year as he felt it was too competitive for his liking. He studied Business and IT (Information and Technology) at Nanyang Polytechnic and graduated a few months back.

PAYING IT FORWARD

John is now a role model for the younger children at Sunbeam Place. He is one of the oldest kids still living there but he is looking forward to being independent once he enters the army. He said: "I want to be their listening ear. I want them to have what I didn't have when I first came — an older sibling or friend who would look out for them."

"Most of the children in there have no dreams. Even though they are very young, they believe they have no future," he added. John encourages them by telling them not to give up on their dreams.

"Don't let others put you down. Concentrate on the things you like to do and give it your best. Take the leap of faith."

*Not his real name.

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home, I was given all the freedom I wanted because there was hardly any supervision at home."

John also found it hard to communicate with the other children at Sunbeam Place