

From no food at home to dishing out food to the masses

He owns a food stall now but had a rough start in life, often going hungry for days at a stretch

Melody Zaccheus
Heritage and Community Correspondent

A young Timothy Cheng considered it a good day when he had instant noodles to eat – sometimes he would go without food for as many as three days.

He grew up in a rental flat lacking basic furniture such as a sofa and beds. The entire flat had no floor tiles and was generally dim. His father, the sole breadwinner, was a salesman of kitchen appliances in Rochor Centre. He spent much of his income on cigarettes and beer, leaving the family in poverty.

Today, Mr Cheng has no lack of instant noodles. The 33-year-old runs a mookata – Thai barbecue and steamboat – stall in a coffee shop in a Toa Payoh industrial park and serves instant noodles with a generous spread of succulent grilled meats and fresh vegetables.

“It’s very satisfying putting food on the table for others,” he told The Straits Times, flashing a grin and revealing his braces.

“In the past, I used to avoid coffee shops and hawker centres and I would run away whenever I saw people buying food because my stomach would be growling and rumbling intensely.”

Mr Cheng was just 11 when his father died of stage three lung cancer and tuberculosis at the age of 49, leaving him, his older brother and their mother, Madam Loo Yoke Ying. She would cry for him every night. “Her weeping and moaning sounded straight out of a horror movie,” Mr Cheng recalled.

He also began to realise that unlike other mothers, she had never asked him if he had eaten or how his day in school had been. He said she never made eye contact and had a perpetually glazed look – “as if she was not present”. He suspected that she might be mentally ill.

On a few occasions, she tried to hurl him out of their 11th-storey flat while he was sleeping. She even tried to set fire to the flat. These episodes usually ended with his suicidal mother on the floor, in a pool of tears, bawling about her inability to support the family.

His interactions with functioning adults such as Mr Philip Ang, a youth worker who gave Mr Cheng tuition, confirmed his suspicions.

The then 11-year-old took his mother by bus to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) for her first check-up, where she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. His brother was then living with a



Mr Timothy Cheng (left) says he was blessed to have met Mr Philip Ang, who was a youth worker when he spotted Mr Cheng when he was a boy wandering around aimlessly at a market in Toa Payoh. Mr Cheng’s father died when he was just 11, and he had to care for his mentally ill mother on his own. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

relative, so the scrawny boy had to drag her to IMH for regular check-ups by himself most times, with Mr Ang helping occasionally.

Sometimes Madam Loo would drop to the floor and pretend that she had fainted to avoid the doctor.

People would look at them as if they were a nuisance. “I felt embarrassed but told myself to stay strong,” he said.

Mr Cheng said he was “blessed” to have met Mr Ang, who had spotted him wandering around aimlessly at a market in Toa Payoh. With Mr Ang’s help, the family began receiving some aid in cash and kind from a church and the authorities. Mr Cheng also worked as a newspaper boy.

Mr Ang, now 44 and a private practice psychologist, said: “Timothy was a small street urchin who was bullied and looked like he could have been blown away by the wind.”

“Yet, he was acting beyond his years, taking his mother to the doctor and getting her to take her medications daily.”

At church, the “urchin” joined the adult congregation as he could not relate to the children. He said: “My peers were talking about Nintendo. Meanwhile, I was trying to

learn more about the different medications I had to feed my mother.”

He passed his Primary School Leaving Examination on his second try with Mr Ang’s help and did well enough to go to polytechnic.

Mr Cheng graduated from Nanyang Polytechnic with a diploma in manufacturing engineering but it was not what he wanted to do. Mr Ang encouraged him to try different career paths and he did.

He worked as a property agent, a front desk and housekeeping executive at the Hotel 81 chain and V Hotel in Lavender and an assistant operations manager at Jumbo Seafood.

In November last year, Mr Cheng, a reader of Home And Decor magazine since he was 13, started an interior design firm after taking a course on the subject. He has already designed four homes as well as an office and a jewellery shop.

He then pumped his earnings from his company, Dezigner Labs, into starting the mookata stall. He has hired two culinary school graduates from the Institute of Technical Education to help run the business.

Mr Ang, a member of the Grace Assembly of God church who has mentored more than 10 people across his career and church net-

Making a life for himself



SCAN TO WATCH




work, said: “I believe resilience can be cultivated in every individual, whether young or old. If we have a finishing line to focus on and the heart and mind to stay on track, we can succeed. Tim’s life story is an example.”

These days, it is not Mr Cheng’s financial independence and business ventures that put a smile on his face, but the progress made by his mother, who is now 62. They live in a three-room flat in Toa Payoh which they own jointly.

Tearing, he said: “She used to be like a zombie. She couldn’t talk nor-

mally or respond. Her tone was monotonous. She had no interest in basic things like eating.”

Today, she has moments of lucidity when she chats with him about his day. He said: “When I ask her what she wants to eat, she has a strong opinion. If we ate chicken rice the day before, she will request something else for lunch. She even asks me when I plan to get married.”

He added: “This has been a 22-year journey. Where she is today is a dream come true for me.”

melodyz@sph.com.sg