

Mr Jackson Aw, 28, founder of local designer toy company Mighty Jaxx, at his office in Prosper House, Geylang, next to an XXRAY figure of the Joker. The company, which now works with brands like Warner Bros and is projected to hit \$5 million in revenue this year, began in 2012 as a \$20,000 start-up. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Mighty Jaxx's toy story is one of guts and glory

Local toymaker's business is no child's play as owner followed his passion with \$20k loan

Raffaella Nathan Charles

For Mr Jackson Aw, toys are certainly no child's play.

The 28-year-old is the founder of a multimillion-dollar toy design and manufacturing business.

The business, Mighty Jaxx, began in 2012 as a \$20,000 start-up. Today, it works with big brands like Warner Brothers and New Balance and is projected to hit \$5 million in revenue this year.

Mr Aw's toy story is about following one's passion in school, even if it means taking a path less ordinary.

The Nanyang Polytechnic alumnus, whose achievements were highlighted by the poly recently, took a diploma course in interaction design, which is about designing interactive digital products.

At Nanyang Poly, he was close to digital photography lecturer James Lee, who went on street photography sessions with him outside class.

"He pushed me to take the alternative path. He taught me a lot about creative freedom, about not needing to conform to a structure, which was really refreshing to me," said Mr Aw.

In 2009, Mr Aw graduated and started selling refurbished vintage cameras. The business was successful but he sold it off to a business partner in September 2012 to start something new.

After years of collecting toys, Mr Aw figured he should start a related business. He liked the idea of creating toys and not just buying them.

So he visited some toy factories in China and was surprised to find out that the toys were made not by

machines but humans.

It made Mr Aw appreciate the toys more after seeing that many hands went into making them.

"I come from an average family, so my parents thought I was crazy, but they helped me arrange the (\$20,000) loan. They've grown to understand the business more now and they're quite supportive," he said.

Mr Aw first worked with local artist, Clogtwo, to design an original character called "Hell Lotus" – a skeleton sitting on a lotus. They produced 200 models and sold them at the Singapore Toy Game and Comic Convention in 2012.

"We sold a grand total of 20 pieces," he said, chuckling.

"When I was younger, I didn't think so much, and I just did things. The risk was high, but the payout was high too – it made sense to me to create a group of people who could appreciate these toys."

Business grew year by year.

In 2014, he expanded by shipping to Shanghai, the company's first overseas venture.

Mighty Jaxx then worked with Warner Bros to create a line of XXRAY figures – a dissection of Justice League superheroes like Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman in all their guts and glory.

Mr Aw said the Warner Bros people he worked with appreciated originality and a balance between design and commercial value.

He said: "They were really awesome in helping us decide what worked. That might have compromised designs, but it helped us understand the masses more."

Now, Mighty Jaxx ships to over

50 countries and employs 20 people, including a stream of interns, to work in areas from conceptualising and sculpting to after-sales services. Last year, it had 100 new toy releases. In five years, the business has sold thousands of models.

Mr Aw said he has learnt several important lessons.

"Back then, when it was a small company, I thought all my problems would go away if I just had money, but being here also poses a new set of challenges," he said.

Aside from managing finances, he also learnt to leverage the experiences of his employees.

"Sometimes, one of them takes two weeks off to climb mountains overseas, or do other things," he said. "I let them go, because I know they are going to come back inspired. So they share what they did, and these go into our designs."

On the local toy manufacturing industry, Mr Aw said the small scale of Singapore means the community is small. "There are around 50 people who design toys here," he said. "We're all quite close."

Business development manager, Mr Hide Horie, from local toy distributor Simply Toys which has been around for 17 years, echoed this: "It's a niche community that started in recent years and is expanding, though toy imports have been around for longer."

Aside from toy manufacturing, Mighty Jaxx has been working to expand its presence by going into projects with dance crews, music labels and freelance artists.

Ultimately, an important thing to have is passion, Mr Aw said.

"In Mighty Jaxx, we're not money or award hungry. It's passion and an open mind that helps you stay on course throughout the journey."

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