



Nanyang Polytechnic graduate Gary Lau runs a non-profit organisation providing free tuition to disadvantaged children.

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SYAMIL SAPARI

More than just tattoos up his sleeves

His body is covered in tattoos, but Mr Gary Lau is not a gangster. At least, not anymore.

The 27-year-old, who graduated from Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) with a diploma in social sciences (social work), runs a non-profit organisation providing free tuition to disadvantaged children.

Called Happy Children Happy Future, it was started last year as part of his final-year project, and now has 90 volunteers helping 60 kids.

"I realised there were these kids who needed help or else they would go through what I experienced, and get involved in criminal activities and more," he said.

Mr Lau graduated among the top performers in his poly cohort. He was awarded the Tay Eng Soon Award for ITE Upgrader – for the most outstanding graduate from the Institute of Technical Education – and the National Council of Social Service Silver Medal.

He has also been accepted into three local universities.

Things were not always this smooth for him. His parents divorced when he was just three and his mother took custody of him.

She later had a boyfriend but he abused her physically and they broke up when the boy was 12.

Mr Lau also recalled how he had no friends and was often bullied in secondary school. A schoolmate then brought him into his gang. "My gang gave me a sense of security and a sense of love and belonging, which raised my self-esteem."

The youngster smoked, got into fights and at 14, got his first tattoo. Over time, he got more tattoos. "There were gang numbers and logos, and even one on my forehead to signify I was a fighter," he said.

When he was 15, his mother applied for a Beyond Parental Control order against him, and he ended up in a home for about two years.

After he was released, Mr Lau worked as a chef at food chain Eighteen Chefs for a year and a half and stopped contacting his gang.

In national service (NS), he realised those in the higher ranks were mostly from polytechnics and junior colleges. He also felt left out in conversations about education.

That drove Mr Lau to take his N levels as a private candidate after NS. "It wasn't easy as I had stopped formal education for many years, and had no guidance."

He then pursued a Nitec in community care and social services at ITE College East, achieving a perfect 4.0 grade point average and entering NYP.

Mr Lau is now looking for a permanent base for Happy Children Happy Future, as tuition sessions are now held at residents' committee centres or students' homes.

Fabian Koh