

XTRA SUCCESS STORIES

YOUNG S'POREANS MADE GOOD



Singapore short on local talent in areas such as Business and Enterprise? Listen to these three Singaporeans speak and you may wonder what the fuss is all about. And they should know what they are talking about — after all, they are prime examples of local talent made good.

HE DARED TO DREAM

HIS ambition was to be his own boss, and even the turbulence that the bursting of the dotcom bubble dealt his computer software start-up did nothing to shake his conviction to hold on to that dream.

While many others would have opted to abandon ship and settle into a stable job, Mr Rakesh Gupta went to the Economic Development Board (EDB) with his business partner to seek funding to start another business.

"I wasn't demoralised at all," said Mr Gupta, 30, referring to his failed first attempt when he was still in university.

"In fact, we felt encouraged by the fact that we had come so far and learnt so much, in such a short time," added Mr Gupta, who also studied at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

His dogged pursuit of enterprise has seen his six-year-old learning software development company, Heulab, grow to become Microsoft Singapore's certified partner; counting more than 100 educational institutions among its local clients; and striking deals with firms from countries like Brunei and Japan.

Today, Heulab's annual revenue has swelled to over \$2 million and major industry players like Microsoft and Fujitsu market the company's products to new regions.

Mr Gupta belongs to a rare breed, as the results of a recent Weekend TODAY survey shows: Respondents ranked Business and Enterprise — after the Arts — as the areas where Singaporean talent is most needed.

The lack of entrepreneurs here, it seems, can be attributed to Singaporeans' fear of failure and the lack of conviction to persevere after setbacks.

When Heulab was mentioned in the Budget Speech last year, then-Second Minister of Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam described the company as "part of a new generation of local firms, fleet-footed, unafraid to venture out to the world early, and at the leading edge of technology".

Although they lacked any kind of business experience when they started out, Mr Gupta said "the folks at EDB told us that it was our passion which had won them over".

The 2007 Singapore Indian Young Entrepreneur winner added that, besides having good business ideas, a never-say-die attitude is key for those dreaming of owning their own businesses. Although many companies he approached in the early days sourcing for investment rejected him, Mr Gupta never stopped trying.

He said: "Explore your potential and the potential of your business idea by seeking funding yourself. The hands-on experience you get pitching your products to investors is incalculable."

TEO XUANWEI



PHOTO COURTESY NGEEN ANN POLYTECHNIC

HE'S A BELIEVER

HIS "poor" A-level results — in his own words — meant that he barely made it to university.

But a decade on, Mr Mustafa Izzuddin, a youth leader with the Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM) and the National Youth Achievement Award Gold Award Holders Alumni, has the world at his feet as he prepares to start his doctorate studies in international relations at the London School of Economics.

Little wonder then, that the 28-year-old research associate with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and an Asean Fulbright Fellow firmly believes in Singapore's ability to spot and groom talent, however one chooses to define it. After all, he is a living testament of a "talent" made good.

Said Mr Mustafa: "Contrary to popular belief, I do not believe there is a dearth of talent in Singapore. There are far more talented young people in Singapore than we give ourselves due credit for."

Talent is abundant among us, and it is not just the

creme de la creme who should be celebrated, he said. For him, the true mark of talent is the "ability of a person to exhibit mature and balanced judgement between one's academic pursuits and non-academic contributions".

Mr Mustafa has been involved in Malay/Muslim community work since he was 16. And through his interactions with students from the Institute of Technical Education, he learned a lot from the "myriad of talents they have, especially in the arts, culture and music".

And he believes that everyone — Government, society and the individual — has a part to play to ensure that the Republic can continue to count on a robust pool of talents, be they new citizens of born-and-bred Singaporeans.

Said Mr Mustafa: "The fact that the Government has been brave and bold enough to introduce broad-based multidisciplinary curriculum to tertiary institutions after years of relative stagnation speaks volumes for the Government's inclination and seriousness to nurture talent in Singapore."

But there remains a fixation in society to nurture talent in the "tried-and-tested fields", placing a premium on occupations such as a doctor or lawyer over, say, a musician or entrepreneur, he noted.

He said: "That said, at the end of the day, talent is about the individual: how far is he or she willing to test, pursue and nurture his or her talent? How much risks and 'stick' is he or she willing to accept in developing his or her talent?" LOH CHEE KONG

SHE WANTS TO SCALE SUMMITS

IT SEEMS like there is nothing Jane Lee cannot do: Leader of Singapore and South-east Asia's first all-woman team that will scale Mount Everest this year; scholar from the National University of Singapore; administrative officer at Republic Polytechnic. You get the idea.

Perhaps the reason why the tall and tanned 24-year-old sticks her fingers into so many pies at the same time is her resolute belief in pushing herself to the limits. Certainly, that is where her passion for mountaineering springs from.

"I don't want to just get a degree, get a job, get married, have children..." she said in a media interview three years ago.

"We're only around on this planet for 80 years or so. I can't sit around being afraid I may die from climbing a mountain. I don't want to become an armchair mountaineer and, at 60, tell myself: 'Gee, I could have done that.'"

To fulfil that lofty dream, Jane and the other members in her team have been training rigorously six days a week for the past three years while juggling their careers.

The punishing regime includes long-distance runs, weights training and trekking. Today, as the nation celebrates National Day, Jane will be somewhere on a mountain in Nepal.

A firm believer of the infinite nature of human potential, she also dabbles in a whole gamut of sea sports — such as diving, kayaking, windsurfing and sailing.

Recently, her repertoire has even extended to dragonboating and outrigger canoeing. The Singapore Paddle Club awarded the Rookie of the Year in 2006.

To Jane — who once described herself as "adventurous, ambitious, and motivated" — the successful conquest of the 8,848-metre high summit would represent much more than a personal achievement for herself and her teammates.

She had said: "We want to inspire other women to do it. We want to show that a woman can balance adventure sports and a career, be a mother and a mountaineer, cook and climb mountains."

TEO XUANWEI



PHOTO COURTESY SINGAPORE WOMEN'S EVEREST TEAM



WEE TECK HIAN