



For Mr Tan Jun Xiang, now in his second year at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS, being accepted into his secondary school of choice after his parents appealed marked the start of his path to academic success. ST PHOTO: DAVE ANG

GenerationGrit

From a PSLE score of 181 to NUS Medicine

Tan Jun Xiang, 22, has had an interesting life trajectory, going from a 181-point scorer in the PSLE to medical student at the National University of Singapore. In the second of a new series on inspiring millennials, he tells *The Straits Times* that young people should not give up on their dreams.

Theresa Tan

Mr Tan Jun Xiang, 22, is not your typical medical student who aced all his school examinations. In fact, he scored only 181 points in the PSLE and had to go into the five-year Normal stream in secondary school. So the polytechnic graduate, who made it to the prestigious medicine faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS), is among the rare few who do not fit the mould. When he was younger, he never thought he would go to university – much less the highly competitive Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS, where only about one in seven applicants get in. So what sparked his stunning academic turnaround? A few things: seeing how disappointed his parents were with his results, getting into the secondary school of his choice, and discovering that he could indeed do well if he put his mind to it. The eldest of three children, Mr Tan was a lacklustre pupil at Anderson Primary School who never scored an A. He was more interested in playing on his Game Boy, a hand-held video gaming device. “I am a very playful person and studying was not my thing,” he said. “I only flipped through my textbooks a day before my PSLE.” He was unmoved by his poor score until he saw how much it disappointed his parents, a sales manager and an aviation security officer. He was also posted to a school

Stunning academic turnaround

SCAN TO WATCH




http://str.sg/gritjx

that was not of his choice. But Ang Mo Kio Secondary gave him a chance after his parents appealed for a place there. It was the school to which he had wanted to go and that acceptance marked the start of his path to academic success. “I did not want to waste the chance I had been given. It was precious,” he said. So the Normal (Academic) student started to pay attention in class. He was diligent about homework and asked his teachers about material he did not understand. He tried hard because he wanted to get into the school’s through-train programme, which allowed him to take the O levels in Secondary 5, instead of the N levels first in Sec 4 and the O levels a year later. Said Mr Tan: “My teachers did not

treat us like lousy Normal (Academic) students, but pushed us to do our best.” He graduated at the top of his school cohort, scoring nine points for his O levels. That gained him a place in the “highly competitive” biomedical science faculty at Singapore Polytechnic. An SP spokesman said biomedical science is one of its more popular courses. While pursuing his diploma, he realised through an internship at a hospital that he was fascinated by the human body and intrigued by the multitude of diseases. He enjoyed talking to people and also wanted to understand patients’ concerns and fears. He realised that he wanted to be a doctor. It was a lofty goal, considering that about 2,000 top students fight

for 300 places at the NUS medical school each year. But he applied anyway and was accepted last year. “It was beyond my wildest dreams to get in,” he said. “My father booked two tables at a restaurant and invited my relatives to celebrate.” Mr Tan, who is in the second year of a five-year degree course, was initially apprehensive that he would have nothing in common with the other students, who were from top schools or more privileged backgrounds. His dad’s highest qualification is an O-level certificate, while his mum has N levels. But he need not have worried, for he found that he was able to make friends. Associate Professor S.T. Dheen, the school’s head of the department of anatomy, taught Mr Tan and praised his academic performance as “very good”. Prof Dheen said: “He was respectful, attentive and showed a positive attitude in his studies. I am sure he will continue to excel in his studies and become a role model for the aspiring younger generation.” Mr Tan said: “Everyone was very surprised that my PSLE score was only 181 points and they were intrigued by how I made it to medicine. “I tell others: Don’t give up, just aim high and don’t compare yourself to others. You will never know what may happen.”

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

I did not want to waste the chance I had been given. It was precious.



MR TAN JUN XIANG, a polytechnic graduate who made it into Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS, on getting a place at Ang Mo Kio Secondary, a school that he had wanted to attend.

UNEXPECTED

It was beyond my wildest dreams to get in. My father booked two tables at a restaurant and invited my relatives to celebrate.



MR TAN, on making it into the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS.

GENERATION GRIT: Know of a Singaporean aged 35 or below who has shown grit amid life’s adversities? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

theresat@sph.com.sg