

Special report: Social mixing across class lines

Singaporeans are not mixing much with people from different classes, a recently published study by the Institute of Policy Studies has found. Insight looks at two real-life stories of friendships formed – both within and outside of traditional social circles.

He made 'different' types of friends through NS

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

At the age of 24, Mr Shaun Lim's social circle consists mainly of his friends from university and junior college.

The final-year law student from the National University of Singapore (NUS) graduated from top schools, including Raffles Institution and Nanyang Primary School.

"Most of the people in law have similar backgrounds. I have a classmate from polytechnic but she's an exception," says Mr Lim.

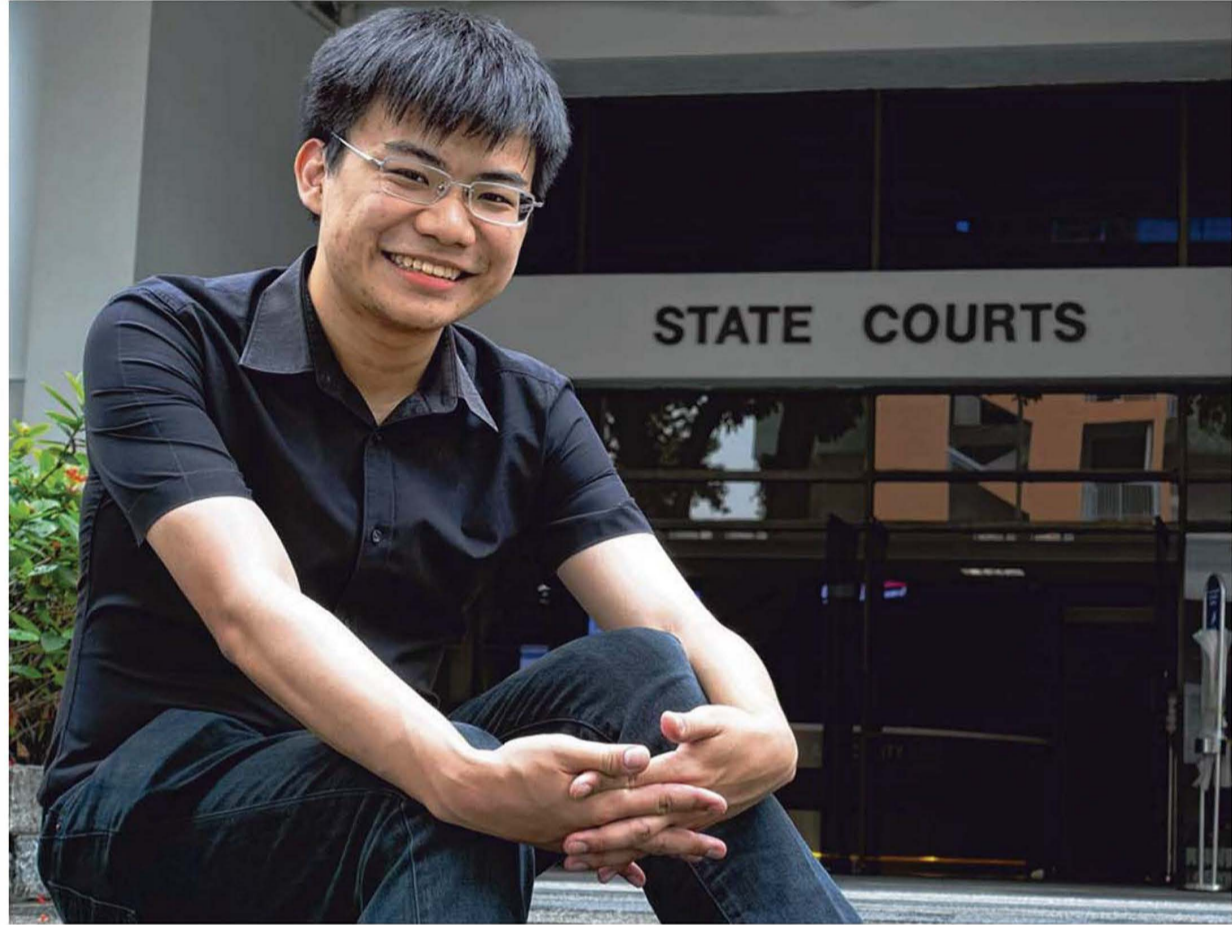
His experience reflects a study finding that the type of school influences the type of friends you make, that people who come from "elite" schools tend to mix with their own kind.

Indeed, Mr Lim's first extended experience of people from other backgrounds came when he undertook that rite of passage, national service, where he was posted to lead an infantry unit.

"It was quite a different experience from basic military training and Specialist Cadet School. There were the Hokkien-speaking guys, it was almost like (local comedy) Army Daze but a lot less funny," he says.

But beyond the army, hardly any opportunity arose for Mr Lim – whose father is between jobs and mother is a bank manager – to make friends with people from other types of schools.

He took part in a few inter-



school camps as part of the National Police Cadet Corps when he was younger.

"We were put in groups of people from different schools from our geographical area, but there was still a tendency to mingle with friends from your own school," he says.

A week of camp is also not enough to develop close friendships, he adds. "The ties are just not as strong as those you form from studying together for a year or more."

Academics say it is natural that people form stronger connections with others they meet in their for-

mative schooling years.

Education policy expert Jason Tan says: "By default, and by no one's fault, the school trajectory you take narrows the kind of people you see every day."

He adds: "Schools are actively doing their part to encourage students to be aware of the larger society, through subjects like social studies, community service, inter-school activities and overseas trips."

"But some of these activities are periodic and of short duration, so the difficulty is in ensuring they have longer-lasting impact beyond their completion."

REACHING OUT BEYOND FRIEND CIRCLE

But Mr Lim – an only child who lives with his family in a Bedok condominium – does not live in a complete bubble.

He has spent much of his time as a volunteer at the State Courts, helping train his juniors and building a programme where law students help the public understand processes like filing claims and applying for court orders.

For his efforts, he won the Pro Bono Leadership Award from NUS and the Outstanding Court Volunteer Award in the student category last year.

Since 2014, he has also been helping out with weekly Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) in Buona Vista.

"I do try to be mindful that people don't always come from similar backgrounds. As an MPS volunteer, I do have a sense of the circumstances that less privileged families go through," says Mr Lim.

He adds: "A classless society is not possible, but those from less well-off backgrounds must feel that social mobility is possible, that they have enough opportunities to move up."

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Law student Shaun Lim volunteers at the State Courts, helping train his juniors and building a programme where law students help the public understand legal processes.
ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW



Mr Joel Lee Hong Seng and Madam Lorinne Kon in his one-room rental flat in Jalan Besar (left) and in her 1,600 sq ft condominium unit in Balestier. The close friends often chat over tea at a coffee shop near his flat. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE

When a company director meets an ex-convict

Ng Jun Sen

He is a former convict and a secondary school dropout who has spent around two decades in and out of prison for drug offences.

She is a Hwa Chong alumna, a master's graduate who studied in the United States and now sits on the boards of directors of a dozen firms and charities.

Despite living in two different worlds, Mr Joel Lee Hong Seng, 49, and Madam Lorinne Kon, 52, are close friends who enjoy each other's company, often reminiscing over tea at a coffee shop near his flat or listening to sermons to-

gether in church.

With a recent study concluding that Singaporeans do not mix across social classes, their genuine friendship is a statistical anomaly.

The study found that Singaporeans' social circles tend to be limited to those who live in similar types of housing and have similar educational backgrounds. Those who participate in religious organisations or volunteer for social causes, however, are more likely to expand their circles across such divides.

Mr Lee now lives alone in a one-room rental flat in Jalan Besar. But for nearly seven years, his home was Cluster A2 of Changi Prison.

In stark contrast, Madam Kon,

who is married with two children, lives in a 1,600 sq ft condominium unit in Balestier.

Now a delivery driver, a job he found thanks to the help of Madam Kon and other friends at Paya Lebar Methodist Church, Mr Lee says his life of crime and drugs is over – all because of a chance encounter in 2014.

Then, she was one of three Thursday volunteers with Prison Fellowship Singapore (PFS), which conducts regular weekday Bible classes for inmates. Says Mr Lee in Mandarin: "She sat next to me during the Bible classes, so when there was a passage that I couldn't understand, I would ask Lorinne."

Her first memory of Mr Lee is of him asking thoughtful questions, and of his attentiveness in these classes. He would also shush others when their attention lapsed, reminding them that the volunteers were there every week out of goodwill.

Technically, the PFS programme ends when the inmate is released. But Madam Kon continued to keep in touch with him.

Their shared religion kept them connected at first, but eventually both found another common cause: to make sure Mr Lee stays clear of harmful substances as he re-enters society.

"As soon as I came out, I have my old friends asking me to go (drink)

Martell," says Mr Lee, referring to a brand of cognac.

"But for the first time, I told them no. I have other friends now. I no longer hang out with those guys."

From time to time, she would share with him information on job opportunities.

He would also call her for help in navigating bureaucracy, such as which MP to contact when his late father suffered a fall, leaving him with unpaid medical bills to clear.

Madam Kon says she arranged for him to meet his MP Denise Phua, and accompanied him to the social service office near his flat to apply for financial assistance.

The reality of being poor in Singa-

pore was not something she had been exposed to before.

By her own admission, Madam Kon is privileged. She was chauffeured to school as a child in the 1970s, received an overseas education and has lived without fear of poverty.

"All my life, I have never been taught the value of saving for a rainy day. It was after I met him that I realised certain things that are so inconsequential to me, like spending money, mean so much to him."

"Our world views are so different, and I have learnt so much from Hong Seng," she says.

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