

Two NUS graduates on their tough road to success

Overcoming great odds, they now aim high

✓ CLEMENT YONG

Born blind, Mr Steven Tanus, 24, is the first visually impaired student to attain a Bachelor of Music degree at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

He will receive his degree this month with 10,866 other graduates. Commencement ceremonies for the NUS class of 2018 will be held from July 12 to 19.

Speaking to *The New Paper* while seated next to a grand piano at NUS' Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music concert hall, he said: "I do not want to be known as just a good blind pianist. I want to be known as a good pianist who happens to be blind."

Encouraged to learn music when he was four years old, he had formal piano lessons only at 16. It was only after he met Mr Stephen Tamadji, a renowned pianist in Jakarta, in 2012 that he fell in love with the instrument he describes as an entire orchestra contained in a big box.

Now, he learns pieces by ear and through memory, taking an average of two months to learn each new piece.

For that, he thanks his friends



Mr M Thirukkumaran (left) and Mr Steven Tanus. TNP PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

and teachers at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory for their patience.

He said: "It is a small and intimate community. Everyone is willing to help. When I feel discouraged, my friends tell me they would not be able to play the way they do if they closed their eyes."

Mr Tanus has won medals at international piano festivals in Vienna and Tokyo in competitions held for people with disabilities, but he dreams of one day competing on a level playing field with other pianists.

He is thinking of pursuing a master's in piano in Europe.

Mr M Thirukkumaran, 25, will also be graduating this month. He had scored 173 points for his PSLE and was so bad in his studies that his school almost kicked him out in Secondary 2.

He said he once scored one out of 50 for an algebra test in Sec 3.

But thanks to his mathematics teacher, Mr Tan Thiam Boon, he topped his class for the next test that year.

Mr Thirukkumaran will now graduate from NUS with a Bachelor of Science in Business Analytics with highest distinction. He will also address his peers as the valedictorian at his graduation ceremony.

Mr Thirukkumaran is also the recipient of a scholarship awarded by the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, where he hopes to tackle social problems related to the environment.

Next year, he will pursue a master's in computer science overseas, possibly at the University of Edinburgh.

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