

LIFE AFTER... A DECADE BEHIND BARS

So much of the news is about what's happening in the moment. But after a major event, people pick up the pieces, and life goes on. In this new series, *The Straits Times* talks to the everyday heroes who have reinvented themselves, turned their lives around, and serve as an inspiration to us all.

A lawyer and proud dad after struggle with drugs



life after...

Chang Ai-Lien
Associate News Editor

He taught himself English – a language he had forgotten – then beat his drug habit and stepped out of prison and straight into law school. The impressive turnaround has won him many accolades, but Mr Darren Tan, now a full-fledged lawyer and deputy managing director at ground-breaking firm Invictus Law Corporation, most values something else altogether.

“My biggest achievement was getting married and starting a family. I never thought I deserved to have my own family, after causing so much heartache, disappointment, and trouble to my parents,” he said.

The *Straits Times* first interviewed Mr Tan in 2013 as he was working his way through law school at the National University of Singapore. ST caught up with him again recently for this series.

THE LONG ROAD TO SUCCESS

Speaking from his Havelock Road office, the clean-cut 46-year-old is a far cry from the aggressive youth who joined a gang at age 14 and spent his days fighting, extorting money and peddling drugs.

As a child, Mr Tan did well in the PSLE, scoring three As and an A*. But the latch-key kid, whose father worked in a coffee shop and mother at a fruit stall, was often left to his own devices at home. His friends were in neighbourhood gangs, and he spent a lot of time roaming the streets.

What began as a dalliance with marijuana when he was in secondary school evolved into a full-blown addiction to crystal methamphetamine or “Ice”.

At age 14, he was smoking mari-

juana, sniffing glue and taking sleeping pills to get high.

He also sold pirated VCDs, collected protection money and was involved in illegal gambling and drug trafficking, often spending long stretches not going home.

By the time he turned 18, he was sent to the Reformatory Training Centre for two years for armed robbery and drug consumption.

The strict regime did not make a dent. After he was released, he went back to trafficking drugs. Eleven months later, he was back in jail for trafficking and taking drugs. This time, he was given an eight-year sentence.

Just six months after his release, he was caught again and sent back to prison for another five years for possessing and taking drugs.

He became the first person to feel the bite of the newly amended Misuse of Drugs Act, which hands out long prison sentences to recalcitrant users of synthetic drugs. The amendment was barely one month old.

On top of that, Mr Tan received 19 strokes of the cane in total for drug and gang-related offences, and was put in solitary confinement multiple times, including for two months once for fighting with another inmate.

On the outside, he seemed beyond reach. His inner self, however, was in turmoil.

Every time he was locked up, someone dear to him died, including his beloved grandmother. But when things seemed darkest, he reached an inflection point.

Alone in his cell and confronted with a life devoid of meaning or accomplishments, he saw things more clearly at last. At his lowest point, he found God, and decided to make something of himself.

“You can’t lose hope when you hit rock bottom, otherwise you will never get back up,” he said. “You

have to keep the faith and tell yourself, you just have to be better today than yesterday.”

Filled with a sense of purpose and the desire to give back, he returned to his studies with a vengeance, re-learning the English he had forgotten from years of speaking only Hokkien and Malay to fellow inmates.

To get up to speed, he read the newspapers intensively and kept a dictionary and grammar book by his side.

He aced the A levels, scoring four As and a B, including AI for General Paper.

He applied to law school in 2009 and was interviewed in jail by two law professors, who said he demonstrated character, perseverance and commitment, as well as maturity, humility and honesty.

Mr Tan became the first student with such a long criminal past to be admitted to law school at NUS.

INNER STRENGTH

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”

MR DARREN TAN

SINGLE-MINDED

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MRS ELAINE TAN, Mr Darren Tan’s wife.

But his path continued to be rocky at times.

Fresh out of jail at age 31 and straight into NUS, he felt awkward and self-conscious.

He was older than his peers, dressed and looked different, had no laptop or textbooks, was a newcomer to e-mail and relied on pen and paper.

Instead of socialising with his course mates, he would sit alone in the Botanic Gardens beside the school during breaks.

Recalling one occasion when he did not know the location of a class, had been changed – as he did not have ready access to e-mail and no friends to call – he panicked at the sight of the empty classroom and began running up every floor to search for the class.

Along the way, the sole of his five-year-old sneaker came loose, but he continued searching, dragging the flapping sole along.

Mr Darren Tan tries to have dinner with his family every night, spending time with his two young daughters, before he goes back to work till about midnight. ST PHOTO: CHANG AI-LIEN

“I felt I was very self-conscious to begin with, and at that moment I believed that everyone’s eyes were on me, I wished the ground would just open up and swallow me.”

But in time, he made friends, some of them lifelong.

In 2014, he was called to the Bar, an occasion that brought immense satisfaction because of the nay-sayers along the way. His proud parents, who attended the event, could not stop smiling.

“Things that are worth pursuing are often difficult,” he said. “But the surest way to get there is one step at a time.”

“You must keep the faith, and have hope. If you lose hope, you’re done.”

He was accepted as a trainee lawyer at TSMF Law Corporation, where he stayed for five years before moving on to Invictus.

His monumental achievement did not go unnoticed by others. Britain’s Prince Edward, for one, invited him to London to speak about the National Youth Achievement Awards he received while in prison.

He also received a JCI Ten Outstanding Young Persons of the World (TOYP) award in his category. JCI is a non-profit organisation of young people who want to have an impact on their communities.

Mr Tan was not satisfied merely with accepting the accolades.

Keenly aware of his mission to support marginalised groups, including former offenders, underprivileged children and foreign workers, he co-founded Beacon of Life Academy, an organisation to help at-risk youth, in 2013.

SCAN TO WATCH
The key moments of Darren Tan’s life
<https://str.sg/vid-after25>





Mr Darren Tan, lawyer and deputy managing director at Invictus Law Corporation, has won accolades for beating his drug habit and turning his life around. But he considers getting married and starting a family as his biggest achievement.
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE



Children in a village in Indonesia's Southwest Papua region enjoying some of the toys donated by Mr Tan and his family.
ST PHOTO: CHANG AI-LIEN

He has also served on the board of Tasek Academy and Social Services, a charity with Institution of a Public Character status supporting marginalised groups such as former inmates and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, since its inception in 2014.

Since 2015, he has been a member of the CSR Sub-Committee of the Singapore Academy of Law, which aims to raise awareness and funds for the Yellow Ribbon Fund Skills Training Assistance to Restart (Star) bursary. This provides financial assistance to needy ex-offenders wishing to pursue tertiary education or training after their release. Mr Tan himself was a recipient of the bursary at law school.

He has been active in the working group to organise the CJ's Cup, an annual futsal event which raises funds in the legal community for the bursary as well as a volunteer aftercare programme. In 2024, he helped invite former national footballer Fandi Ahmad to play in the opening exhibition match.

He was appointed a member of the Yellow Ribbon Singapore Rehabilitation Committee and a member of the National Committee on Preventing Offending and Re-Offending, overseeing national efforts to prevent recidivism and enhance rehabilitation.

And though his bread-and-butter cases come from civil and commercial litigation, he spends about 10 per cent of his time on pro bono cases.

Like the one he worked on with non-profit Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) to get six months' worth of back pay to a 49-year-old dishwasher, whose employer had sent her back to China without the money he owed her. The money was wired to her, and the overjoyed woman wrote back to thank the team for their efforts.

"I pick these cases very carefully,

and these are the most memorable," he said.

But the spectre of falling back into his old ways is never far away. "A drug addict can never forget that high. For many, even myself, it's a lifetime struggle," he admitted.

Still, a watershed moment happened when he was in his second year at law school, and met up with an old buddy.

"He was taking Ice right in front of me, and we used to do it together. Seeing him do that should have been the ultimate trigger.

"But I had no urge, and even hated drugs for destroying my friend's life. That was when I knew drugs no longer had a hold on me.

"There are more important things in my life now."

His friend ended up back in prison.

FIRM, FRIENDS, FAMILY AND FAITH

Invictus is almost an extension of his family.

His wife, Elaine, 36, is the general manager at the firm.

His partner, the firm's managing director Josephus Tan – himself a reformed delinquent turned lawyer – lives in the same condominium. Both men and their colleagues go jogging together weekly, as well as on holidays overseas with their families each year, venturing to places such as Japan, South Korea and China, the UK and Greece.

"In a very cut-throat industry where everyone is trying to make money, we are more like a family," said Mr Josephus Tan, 45.

"Darren is one of the very rare few that I would consider a close friend, someone I would actually listen to."

Mrs Elaine Tan, speaking to ST from the family's Keppel Bay apartment, said she met her husband when he was representing her uncle for drug offences.

"He was able to converse in traditional Hokkien and was respectful, making it very comfortable for the elders to deal with him as none of my uncles speak English," she said.

"I saw that he was very positive after going through everything, and determined to change.

"It took a lot of courage to do what he did. A lot of people told him not to waste his time... this is the part that impressed me."

So she asked him out to dinner. A year later, they were married.

They are now the proud parents of two girls, Phoebe, who turns seven in June, and Hannah, who is five.

"In the past, work was everything to him," she said. "Now it's family."

Mr Tan says the family has enough for all their needs, which are simple to begin with.

"I am contented and grateful."

The spirit of giving is evident.

When the couple learnt that this reporter was visiting a remote part of Indonesia, they immediately packed two large bags of toys to give to children there, which their daughters helped to pick out from their own collection.

These days, Mr Tan tries to have dinner with his family every night, spending time with the girls before he goes back to work till about midnight.

On Sundays, he may take them to the swimming pool or on walks to nearby Labrador Park.

The couple carve out a few hours together each weekend to be together, going on movie dates or having brunch together.

Said Mr Tan: "Most people would describe me as a workaholic, but although I'm committed to work, family time is very important.

"In the past, I destroyed a lot of families because of my drug trafficking. Now what matters to me most is family, and faith."

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