

# Prison School to NUS

## At 36, former drug abuser finds it's never too late to get a degree

Behind every academic result is a young person quietly chasing their dreams, beating the odds and hoping to make something of themselves. In this monthly series, *More than Grades*, we tell the stories of young people who are making waves in school and beyond.

*More than  
Grades*

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In mid-2017, Mr Mason Lim woke up disoriented to find himself strapped down in the psychiatric ward of Changi Prison, subdued in a three-way restraint where only one hand was free to move.

He was then 28 years old, going through drug withdrawal symptoms, and facing the start of his four years and four months' prison stay and 10 strokes of the cane for drug-related charges.

For nearly three weeks, he lay confined on a plastic bed, never imagining how his life would eventually turn out.

On July 13, Mr Lim, now 36, graduates from the National University of Singapore, with an honours degree in communications and new media, a feat paved from a winding road that saw him quitting school twice.

In 2006, he joined Victoria Junior College but dropped out after just three months. "The textbooks were super thick, and back then I didn't like to read much," he said.

Upset that he was not allowed to join his football team because he had entered the school through its Direct School Admission scheme for hockey, he impulsively decided to leave.

That year, he enrolled in Temasek Polytechnic's hospitality and tourism management course.

Everything was on track until some schoolmates invited him to their poker games. That was when he realised how much more money he could make if he hosted the



Mr Mason Lim with Dr Jinna Tay, senior lecturer, Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore. On July 13, Mr Lim graduates with an honours degree in communications and new media, a feat paved from a winding road that saw him quitting school twice. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



Mr Lim aced his A-level examinations in Prison School, becoming the school's top student with five As and one B. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MASON LIM  
Left: Mr Lim with his mother, Madam Maureen Chua, who was disappointed with his decision to quit junior college and polytechnic. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MASON LIM

games himself.

He moved out of his parents' home in Tampines and decided to rent an apartment with a friend to host poker games together. Hosting five sessions a week, he pocketed at least \$10,000 a month.

"At that age, seeing that kind of money, school was like secondary," said Mr Lim, who has an older brother.

He was almost at the finish line of his diploma programme, but left in his fourth year following changes the school made to tutorial attendance requirements.

"I used to be able to not go to school, and then at the end of the

whole semester, just take the supplementary papers, pass, and then progress to the next semester," he said.

His luck ran out at the end of his third year, when the school mandated at least 85 per cent attendance for tutorials in order to pass.

By the time he quit polytechnic in 2009, Mr Lim had built up a lucrative poker community, and moved to a rented terrace house with his poker business partner.

His mother, Madam Maureen Chua, 67, told The Sunday Times that she was disappointed in his choices and felt devastated as he was a bright child.

"I could only advise him, but my advice fell on deaf ears. Plus, I wasn't aware of what he was doing, so it came as a shock to me," said the homemaker. Mr Lim's father has since retired as an in-flight supervisor.

The next year, another friend told him he could earn a lot more as a football bookie with his established network of gamblers.

"Within six months, I built my network to the point where I was making about \$30,000 to \$60,000 a month," he said.

As a 21-year-old then with access to so much cash, Mr Lim said he could not understand the proper

value of money.

When his relationship with a friend went sour after his friend failed to return a \$180,000 loan, Mr Lim moved to Thailand in 2011 for 2½ years. He thought moving away would be an escape from his fast-paced life.

Initially, he had enough savings to rent a condominium unit, get a car and pay for his living expenses in Bangkok. He would fly to Macau once a month to play poker to earn some money.

Still, he felt empty inside.

In Thailand, he looked for relief by searching online for illegal drugs. His poison of choice was tra-

madol, an opioid used for pain management. The first time he tried it, he popped all 10 at one go.

After three weeks of consuming at least 10 tramadol tablets every day, Mr Lim decided to stop, fearing he would slip into addiction.

However, with easy access to tramadol then, he gave in to temptation. What followed was a nearly two-year routine of consuming up to 30 tablets a day.

In 2013, Thailand tightened controls on tramadol due to growing abuse concerns. With supply drying up, Mr Lim decided to return to Singapore.

Back here, he resumed hosting poker games, but felt the toll of his three-year tramadol addiction on his mind and body.

"It wasn't just a mental thing. I realised I couldn't even climb the stairs at 24 years old to go to the toilet on the second floor at home."

His downward spiral culminated in his first arrest on drug-related charges in February 2014. Over the next few years, he was arrested four more times before being sentenced in mid-2017 to more than five years in prison and 10 strokes of the cane.

Behind bars, he turned to the Catholic faith and decided to complete his A levels.

In an environment free from distractions, Mr Lim aced the examinations, becoming the Prison School's top student with five As and one B.

Upon his early release in July 2021, he was accepted into NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and received the Yellow Ribbon Fund Star (Skills Training Assistance to Restart) Bursary, which fully covered his university tuition fees. "I was happy to be given a second chance, where they look beyond my past and see my results," he said.

He chose to study communications and new media, drawn by the course description that it would be "dynamic" and "fun".

One of his lecturers, Dr Jinna Tay, said she never would have guessed his turbulent past - he looked like any other undergraduate and blended in with his cohort.

Dr Tay said Mr Lim was not in a rush to share his views all the time, unlike his peers. But when he did speak up, they were well thought out and showed his level of maturity.

While studying at NUS, Mr Lim sold high-end vacuum cleaners and earned between \$12,000 and \$15,000 a month, as he did not want to burden his parents financially.

He also managed an external football team, and volunteered at Meet-the-People Sessions and elderly home visits in the Cheng San neighbourhood.

This time, he was more determined to finish school.

"I don't want to quit any more," said Mr Lim, who is looking forward to a career in real estate. He is currently living with his girlfriend, a marketing director, in her condominium unit.

On whether he thinks public stereotypes of former offenders may make it difficult for him to move on, he said the court of public opinion never bothered him.

"When people say this can't be done, I cannot relate. Because if you really want something, then you go out and get it."

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