

# From hungry schoolboy to boardroom high-flier

By JENNANI DURAI

HE IS a boardroom high-flier who helped to set up big-name firms including Jetstar Asia and Pepsi-Cola Vietnam.

But as a schoolboy, Mr Tony Chew was more concerned about where his next meal was coming from.

“I was so malnourished that the principal gave me a free bottle of milk each day and made me drink it in front of him,” said the 66-year-old businessman.

“Perhaps he felt that if I didn’t drink it, I may have brought it home to share with my eight siblings. Those days we always shared what little food we had.”

That undernourished child went on to become the chairman of the Singapore Business Federation and founder of more than 20 companies.

And yesterday, he revealed the secrets of his success to an audience of more than 120 students, businessmen and fellow alumni of St Joseph’s Institution (SJI).

They are: vision, help from others and commitment.

Mr Chew, the executive chairman of investment firm Asia Resource Corporation, said he formed a plan at an early age when he was accepted into the household of prominent businessman Mr Ko Teck Kin.

The older man was an inspiration as he had developed his business skills and made a wide network of connections, despite having only a primary school education and speaking no English.

“Mr Ko gave me a vision and an inspiration,” said Mr Chew. “I saw in him the success, the public service and the wisdom which I hoped for, from that day to now.”

Mr Ko was not his only mentor. Another was Dutch businessman Ted de Ponti, with whom he ran a small trading firm in the 1970s.

Mr Chew said that although he had been unable to afford business school, working with Mr de Ponti was a “business education”.

“I learnt the importance of trust in business,” he said. “I learnt how to build trust – by being correct, careful, honest, punctual and meticulous in every part of business.”

It was Mr de Ponti’s death in 1990 that jolted Mr Chew into committing himself to public service in Singapore, inspired by both his mentors’ records of generosity and service.

“That year I made a commitment to look beyond business, and to dedicate myself to Singapore,” he said.

Mr Chew has since served on at least 20 committees, boards or councils of government or economic agency initiatives.

He told the audience that people often ask him if he was ‘lucky’ in life, and he answers by saying that some have good luck and do not make use of it, while others have bad luck but manage to overcome it.

“I didn’t have much luck myself,” he said. “In fact, I had a terrible start in life and many difficulties along the way. Instead of luck, I had three factors: commitment, a plan and a lot of help from others.”

Mr Chew was speaking as part of the Fullerton-SJI Leadership Lecture series that features prominent St Joseph’s Institution alumni. The next instalment in the series is on March 28.

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Mr Tony Chew (left), chairman of the Singapore Business Federation, delivering a lecture in the second instalment of the Fullerton-SJI Leadership Lectures. With him is moderator Arnold Gay. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE