

## **Generation Grit: Mindful of those who helped him, ex-lieutenant colonel pays it forward**

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SINGAPORE - Mr Choy Yong Cong, 34, knows it takes many pairs of hands to raise a child.

Indeed, the deputy director at the Economic Development Board (EDB) is acutely aware that his present success is not his alone. He had help from a host of people - from supportive relatives to caring teachers and understanding bosses - who stepped up when he needed someone.

For instance, there were the relatives who offered shelter to him and his mother after they fled his abusive father.

"I think, without all the people and opportunities I have been given, I wouldn't have made it," Mr Choy said. "Often, we celebrate resilience from an individual standpoint. I think resilience is also a reflection of the importance of our support network, the people who have been good to us and the opportunities we have had."

What pains him is that his mother died of cancer in 2012, just four months after she was diagnosed and just as life was getting better for the pair. The relationship between his parents was strained during his growing up years. Mr Choy remembers his father as an angry man who was verbally abusive. Money was also tight, as the blue-collar worker contributed the bare minimum. His mother worked as a babysitter to make ends meet.

One night, when Mr Choy was about 14 years old, his father threatened to hurt him and his mother, causing such a commotion that the neighbours called the police. His mother took him and left home, while her elder son stayed with their father. She eventually divorced her husband. Mr Choy has had no contact with his father since that night.

For the next seven to eight years, he and his mother put up at the homes of relatives or friends. In the first two years of their "nomadic" existence, they moved at least three times.

Mr Choy took up the SAF scholarship because of the teamwork and camaraderie he had enjoyed while in national service.

"All the moving was very disruptive," he said. "It was also awkward to share a room with your mother when you are a teenager. It was hot and I had no personal space. I also did not have a sense of home and I would stay at the library or hang out at the void deck to stay out. So I was always late for school and falling asleep in class."

Nevertheless, he worked hard, as it was a way to shut out the turmoil in his life. He also wanted to do well to give his mum a better life.

He said, "I didn't tell my teachers and friends what was happening at home. It was my pride and ego. I was afraid of being judged and I didn't want pity."

However, he said his teachers at Anderson Secondary School and National Junior College were very patient with him, despite his tardiness or falling asleep during lessons. He excelled in his examinations, scoring four As at his A levels, and landed the prestigious Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Scholarship to study at Imperial College in London. He graduated with first-class honours in his combined Bachelor's and Master's degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering.

Mr Choy took up the SAF Scholarship because of the teamwork and camaraderie he had enjoyed while in national service. A military career also offered him the physical and intellectual challenge he was looking for.

He said, "I saw leaders in the army who showed me who I hoped I could be. They were inspiring, motivational and were interested in my growth and development."

The scholarship also lifted a major financial burden and gave Mr Choy the chance to study overseas.

He and his mother managed to buy a three-room flat after he started working. But just as life became more comfortable, she was diagnosed with stage 4 stomach cancer. She was 63.

"I feel that fate was very cruel to my mum," he said. "I always believed I would have the rest of my life to treat her well but that didn't happen. Just when she could relax and enjoy life, she was struck with cancer, which is a very cruel disease."

He had to juggle his work and being his mother's sole caregiver, while she went in and out of hospital for cancer treatment. In her last days, he bathed and fed her himself, as she was too weak to do so.

"The sadness still bugs me today," he said. "My mum's death - without a doubt - was the hardest thing in my life. Losing your parent is an experience unlike any other. After her death, I feel a part of me is missing."

He threw himself into work.

Beyond just climbing the career ladder, Mr Choy believed it was also important to look after the well-being and career development of his subordinates. His last rank was that of Lieutenant Colonel and he had some 700 soldiers under his command at the 2nd Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment (2 SIR). He would have regular chats with his subordinates to "check in" on them and to coach them.

"I feel my own experience has made me a better leader. I have learnt to be empathetic while ensuring high standards. Everyone has their own struggles and having been through them myself, I try to reserve judgement," he said. "It is very easy to say someone sucks (at their work), but I try to take one step back and understand what the person is going through. I believe people have potential and we can develop people and help them get there."

A former subordinate, Captain Raymond Zhang, 33, described Mr Choy as an "approachable, humble and genuine" person and a good boss who maintained high standards even as he cared for those below him. For example, before his soldiers went on overseas exercises, Mr Choy would have his commanders visit each one's family to assure the parents that their sons would be in good hands, Capt Zhang said.

Last year, Mr Choy left the army to pursue a new challenge. He is now a deputy director at the consumer team at the EDB, attracting investments to Singapore.

"I wanted to challenge myself. When you are in a new environment, you are forced to learn new skills. When you are uncomfortable, you will find out more about yourself, learn and grow," he said.

Mr Choy, who is single, wants to remain in public service - to serve fellow Singaporeans, given all the help and kindness he has received. He said of his chosen career, "I recognise I'm very lucky and privileged. I have met good people and have had many opportunities. And so I want to create opportunities for others too, especially those who are less privileged."

### **Reflection Questions**

**How did the community of people around Mr Choy impact and help him positively?**

**What mindset and values can you adopt to be a contributor to the community you live in? Now and in the future.**