TWO DOUBLE-DEGREE HOLDERS AWARDED FIRST CLASS HONOURS BY NUS FACULTY OF LAW

Ong Jueqi

More than 220 graduates received law degrees from the NUS Faculty of Law this year. Two of them had participated in a dual degree programme offered by NUS and New York University. Under the programme, they took their undergraduate courses at the NUS Faculty of Law and their graduate courses at the New York University School of Law. Seow Tzi Yang and Koo Zhi Xuan were both conferred first class honours degrees.

Reported by Ong Jueqi

Eight years ago, Seow Tzi Yang, a first-year student at Raffles Junior College, had to repeat his year of studies as he failed four subjects. This same person graduated as a top student at the Commencement Ceremony held by the NUS Faculty of Law last week. He also delivered the valedictorian speech.

Seow and second-highest ranked Koo Zhi Xuan, 25, were awarded first class honours degrees. Both have decided to serve as the Justices' Law Clerks at the High Court. They began the next chapter of their lives at the Supreme Court yesterday.

Seow enrolled into Raffles Institution (RI) after receiving a total of 280 points in his PSLE. However, as his parents were in the middle of a divorce while he was in Secondary Four, and he became engrossed in ball sports after classes, he neglected his studies and his results were adversely affected. His results were one of the lowest among all the first-year students in the entire junior college and had to repeat his year of studies.

Seow wants mother to be proud of him again

Seow suddenly realised the importance of family while he was in National Service after graduating from RI. His mother has never given up on him even when he had the lowest results. Seow's resolution at that time: "I wanted my mother to be proud of me again."

He set the goal in his freshman year at university to be the top student each year. As a result, he was either the top student or among the best in his cohort throughout his undergraduate years.

Seow said that he was very lucky to be able to enrol into the NUS Faculty of Law. He attained two As, one B and one C in his A-level examinations. He failed to get into law school in the first round of selection, and only succeeded in the second round after someone voluntarily gave up his space.

This incident left a deep impression on him. "People often say that Singapore does not allow second chances, but I don't believe it because Singapore did give me a second chance. However, I need to cherish this second chance or else I only have myself to blame."

Seow's mother transformed from a housewife back to a working mother after she divorced his father. She would often leave the house early and come back late because she needed to give tuition lessons to students in order to support her three sons who were all studying at the time. In order to help lessen his mother's burden, Seow took up part-time jobs during his first three years at NUS by helping professors with their research, working as a tuition teacher and even working as a furniture mover.

His mother was his pillar of support during this tough period. He said that he did not think his hardship counts for much when compared to the efforts of his mother in raising three children by herself. The thing that touched his heart the most was that his mother would always prepare his favourite food whenever he came home while he was in NS. When he was studying at the university and working at the same time, his mother would always look out the window, waiting for him to come home regardless of how late it was.

Koo Zhi Xuan aims for the top with a spirit of diligence
Koo Zhi Xuan, 25, is a graduate of Hwa Chong Institution and Raffles Junior College. His academic results have always been good. However, he said that he had never made it into the top three positions in school. "I have never thought of myself as the smartest student, but I possess the spirit of diligence that helps drive me forward." He was ranked second in his cohort while he was in his freshman year. He subsequently became the top student during his final year after working extremely hard to catch up. He said with a smile that it was the result of "blatant hard work". Koo graduated from a SAP school. His grandparents and parents had inculcated the virtues of self-discipline and diligence in him from young. They told him that learning is like sailing against the wind and therefore, making no progress simply means regressing. This cemented the belief in him that as long as he works hard, he will achieve results.

Seow plans to work for a private law firm after serving 18 months at the High Court. His goal is to become one of the top five lawyers in Singapore. Koo has yet to decide on his career direction after this. Both of them hope to serve as volunteers in providing free legal advice to the community while pursuing their legal professions.

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Sharing their thoughts on the Chinese language

The mothers of the two top graduates from the NUS Faculty of Law, Seow Tzi Yang and Koo Zhi Xuan, are both Chinese language teachers. As a result, both young men grew up in Mandarin-speaking homes. During the interview, Seow and Koo stressed the importance of being bilingual in their profession. Both plan to continue to take classes to improve their Chinese language.

After neglecting Chinese in school for years, Koo realised in an interview that his Chinese language skills had fallen behind and resolved to improve in this area. A Senior Counsel who presided over an interview Koo once attended in a law firm tried to talk to him in Mandarin after discovering that he was a graduate of Hwa Chong Institution. He told Koo that the law firm had clients from China and encouraged him to never give up on improving his Chinese.

Apart from helping him at work, Koo believes that his Chinese language skills can also help him in interacting with people who only speak Mandarin while providing voluntary legal services. He sees this as an advantage.

Seow Tzi Yang had served as an intern in a law firm while in university and had to help in the translation of Chinese contracts. He said, "China has a lot of dealings with non-Mandarin speaking countries. For me, being bilingual is not anything special, but rather, a basic requirement because it is a language that lawyers, bankers and people across different professions would need to use to communicate." Seow took up a module called "Chinese Legal Traditions and Legal Chinese" while studying at the NUS Faculty of Law. The module was taught in Mandarin.

Mothers insisted on talking to their children in Mandarin at home

Even though both Seow and Koo no longer take Chinese courses after graduating from junior college, their mothers insisted on communicating with them in Mandarin at home and encouraged them to read Chinese newspapers. Seow's mother, Madam Lee, who has been a secondary school teacher for many years, said, "I know it is very easy for them to master English, but they could end up 'returning' the Mandarin they have learnt to their teachers if they do not have a strong foundation."

Koo's mother, Madam Wang Huijun, who has been a teacher for many years at Raffles Junior College, said that parents must be involved in the learning process of their children. She told Koo stories about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and let him play video games related to the novel at a young age. She believes that her son built a solid foundation through learning Chinese from a young age. Even though he did not take any Chinese lessons in school for eight years, he can still pick up the language again very quickly.

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