He went from jail to NUS law school

Ex-offender turns his life around in jail and will graduate with a law degree this year

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Senior Correspondent

Fresh-faced Mr Darren Tan graduated this year from the National University of Singapore (NUS) with a law degree.

That is quite an achievement for the 34-year-old, who has spent more than 10 years of his life in jail and received 19 strokes of the cane for drug and gang-related offences.

When he straightened himself out, he returned to his studies with a vengeance, aced the A levels, and decided what many consid-
ered an audacious thing: he applied for law at NUS.

Associate Professor Florence Wong, one of two law dons who interviewed him in jail, said he demonstrated character, perseverance and commitment in the way he schooled himself in prison and turned his life around.

When he interviewed him, he also demonstrated maturity, humility and honesty, all important qualities for doing well not just in law school but in his subsequent career,” she told The Straits Times.

He became the first student with a criminal past to be admitted to the NUS law school.

A tertiary kid, he was an only child whose father worked in a coffee shop and mother at a fruit stall.

He did well in primary school, but in secondary school he joined a gang and began a life of drugs and crime.

By 14, he was smoking marihuana, snorting glue and taking sleeping pills to get high, before moving on to poten-
tially dangerous drugs. He also sold piloted VCDs, collected protection money, and was involved in illegal gambling and drug trafficking.

At 16, he was sent to the Reformative Training Centre for two years for robbery and drug consumption.

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 sen-
tence. He was released, only to be caught and sent back for yet anoth-
er five years, for taking drugs.

He was 23 and behind bars when his turnaround finally came. Done in his cell and contemplating-
ing his crimes, he saw things more clearly at last. “I realized that my past life wasn’t very meaningful or satisfying.”

He resumed his studies, eventual-
ly taking the A levels and scoring four As and a B, including an A for General Paper, which he attributed to “reading the newspapers with a dictionary and grammar book by my side.”

He applied for law school from prison, despite everyone advising him not to set himself up for disappointment. “My faith gave me a lot of strength,” said the Christian.

Life is quite different today. He lives with his parents—his father is now a taxi driver and his mother, a production operator. He has a girlfriend, and is a volunteer helping youth at risk and ex-offenders.

He is also working with a part-

me of law firm Ruddell Brothers. Mr] Ai Lian Nalichandran, as part of his law clinic elective module, as-

sisting on active pro bono matters.

Mr Nalichandran: “As a defence counsel we often request a chance for offenders to reform and rehabilitate so I’m glad to be able to support Darren in this cause.”

He is people like Mr Lian that the Yellow Ribbon Fund aims to help. It linked him with a private donor who helped pay for his course fees and provided a living allowance.

Many feel that his hard knocks will set him apart in a lawyer, where he hopes to cut his teeth in commercial litigation.

But first, he will have to be called to the bar. Criteria for admission require one to be of “good conduct and diligence”, and technical-

al, the Attorney-General’s Cham-

bers of Law Society can object.

Note: Mr Nalichandran: “Based on his performance thus far, I look forward to welcoming him to the profession.”