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News

The four new senior counsel

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Jeffrey Chan Law runs in the family of deputy S-G

Growing up, Mr Jeffrey Chan's role models were the late David Marshall, Singapore's first Chief Minister, and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

Both men were lawyers.

Thus, when Mr Chan came to one of life's crossroads, he chose to read law.

Now, two of his three children have followed in his footsteps.

His daughter is a lawyer with a foreign law firm, while his son is an assistant registrar of the Supreme Court. Both have also married lawyers.

His youngest son is studying arts at New York University.

Said Mr Chan, 57, with a grin: 'Every time we sit down for dinner, my wife always complains that she's out-lawyered.' His wife Susan is a deputy director of schools with the Ministry of Education.

This year, Mr Chan - the deputy solicitor-general (S-G) - is one of two from the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) to ever be appointed Senior Counsel. The other is Mr David Chong.

Mr Chan believes that this recognition of legal service officers will inspire younger lawyers to achieve the same status.

A President's Scholar, he joined the Singapore Legal Service in 1973. He headed the Civil Division of the AGC from 1995 to 2007, and the International Affairs Division from December 2007 to July last year.

He graduated as a top student in 1973 at the then University of Singapore. He also obtained a Masters in Law from Harvard University and completed the Advanced Management Programme at Wharton Business School.

When asked to recall one of his most memorable cases, Mr Chan named the case in 2007 in which more than 100 retired civil servants tried to reverse their decision to leave the pension scheme and convert to one under the Central Provident Fund.

'I argued the case and successfully defended the Government,' he said. 'That was one very significant case.'

David Chong He had always wanted to be a legal eagle

If he had not been a lawyer, Mr David Chong would have joined the police force.

The 49-year-old said it was TV shows like Perry Mason and The Paper Chase, which centred on the lives of lawyers, that motivated him to pick a career in law. 'It got me excited about law, I'd always wanted to be involved in law enforcement,' said Mr Chong.

But when he became a lawyer in a the private law firm, he found out 'it was nothing like TV'.

'On TV everything's more dramatic, but in real life, the issues are more complex and very real,' he said.

Mr Chong is now the Civil Division's Principal Senior State Counsel in the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC).

Before serving in the AGC, he was associate professor and vice-dean in the Faculty of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS). For five years, he also practised in a law firm, specialising in shipping and insurance law.

Mr Chong graduated with a second upper honours degree from the NUS and later got his Masters-in-Law degree from the University College London.

He cited the Raffles Town Club (RTC) case which concluded last year, where he represented the Government in the Court of Appeal, as one of his most memorable.

The debate was on whether a district judge, who was a founding member of RTC, could sit on the Income Tax Board of Review to hear the club's appeal. Some felt that it could raise reasonable suspicion of bias.

The Attorney-General argued that the club was not entitled to object to the judge's appointment and that his past links to it would not give rise to suspicions of bias.

They won the appeal.

Mr Chong is married with four children, two of whom are studying law. His wife is a homemaker.

On his appointment, he said: 'I'm honoured and I hope that this will serve as a signal to other legal officers to specialise in court work, knowing that their expertise in advocacy will be recognised by the profession.'

Francis XavierHe wanted to be a doctor but fate intervened

Mr Francis Xavier had always wanted to be a doctor till the day he fractured his back and spent a month in a hospital.

He saw the long hours the doctors kept, and the sleep and hobbies they had to give up.

'To be a doctor, it takes a level of selflessness, which I was not convinced that I had then,' said Mr Xavier, 44.

That hospital stay in 1983 changed his life as he decided to take up law instead.

Now, he is a partner at Rajah & Tann and head of its Commercial Litigation Practice Group.

He also specialised in aviation law, advising in the class-action suit that resulted from the 1997 SilkAir crash in Indonesia and the Singapore Airlines crash in Taiwan in 2000.

He named the case where senior Pertamina official Haji Achmad Thahir died, leaving US\$81.8 million (S\$117.8 million) in Sumitomo Bank in Singapore, as his most memorable.

He was then assisting now Law Minister K. Shanmugam. They were at the time acting as lawyers of Haji Thahir's widow, who was claiming the money her husband left behind.

'I learnt a lot from observing how Mr Shanmugam handled the case,' he said. 'It was a great learning experience.'

When he first learnt that he would be appointed Senior Counsel, Mr Xavier gave his father, a goldsmith in Malaysia, a call.

'In every man's life, his father is always the person he tries to impress,' he said. 'It makes a son happy to be able to make him proud.'

Mr Xavier was born in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. He came to Singapore in 1981 for his pre-university studies and graduated from the National University of Singapore's law faculty.

Outside of work, the bachelor is a man with diverse hobbies - from mountain climbing to racing. Just two weeks ago, he drove a Formula One car in France.

The drummer is also taking vocal and dancing lessons.

Ang Cheng HockLaw Minister's former pupil makes the cut

When Mr Ang Cheng Hock first told his wife he had been appointed Senior Counsel, she was concerned

he would be spending even more time at work.

As it was, he was often spending 12 hours or more at work each day.

At 38, Mr Ang is one of the youngest lawyers to be appointed Senior Counsel. Lawyers below the age of 40 rarely get that honour.

The youngest ever was Mr Alvin Yeo, at 37, in 2000.

On his appointment, Mr Ang said: 'I don't feel the pressure but am very honoured to be made Senior Counsel at this young age.'

He is now a partner at Allen & Gledhill, practising in its litigation and dispute resolution department.

After graduating with first class honours from the faculty of law at the National University of Singapore, Mr Ang did his pupillage under current Law Minister K. Shanmugam.

One thing he learnt from Mr Shanmugam is that there are no short cuts in litigation. Hard work and diligence is necessary.

'I owe him a lot for the experience, training and opportunities he gave me,' said Mr Ang. 'He's one of the most brilliant lawyers.'

Mr Ang has also been involved in a number of high profile cases.

In 2006, he successfully defended Nanyang Technological University professor Bryan Ngoi when the latter was charged with providing false information to the authorities about a 'marriage of convenience'.

He also represented Singapore Island Country Club in a claim brought by Madam Kay Swee Pin for her wrongful suspension from the club. He also defended the present owners of Raffles Town Club in a defamation claim by former remisier Peter Lim in August last year.

Mr Ang expects a busy year ahead dealing with banking-related claims in the bad economic climate.

Asked to describe himself outside of work, he said: 'I'm just a typical Singaporean: go home, watch movies, meet friends, nothing too unusual.'

Reports by Mavis Toh

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