

At the Heart of Family Love

A man so successful you'd think he'd have no time to spend with loved ones or lead a simple life. Could the same man be humble and honest about himself as well? Fiona Biggs investigates her subject – Dato' Raymond Liew.



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AUDIT ASSURANCE, TAX ADVISORY, AND FINANCIAL ADVISORY SERVICES – IT'S SUCH MUNDANE BUSINESS TO MANY IN THE WORKFORCE. SUCH IS NOT THE CASE, HOWEVER, FOR THE MAN BEHIND THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL FIRMS RECOGNISED FOR ITS ACCOUNTING STANDARDS AND PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS.

Dato' Raymond Liew, the founder of McMillan Woods, has a story or two of how he has one man to thank for his great success and one woman to whom he owes his infinite loyalty to for helping him build the business and for growing it to become an international company that is present in 35 countries.

We had to know who these two people were. Says Liew, "The great man I speak of is my father. I can't thank him enough for all the pains he went through to give me an education that led to this." Liew was not keen to get into the details but after some nudging, he shares how he is the youngest of five boys, in a family of 11 siblings. His late father was a very wealthy man and spoilt him rotten, a privilege he enjoyed from being the youngest.

But all wasn't a bed of roses when his father's construction business and operation of a fleet of lorries collapsed due to overtrading. "By this I mean debts started to accumulate because no payments were made to my late father," says Liew. At a young age of about 10, Liew watched his father struggle to provide for the family as relatives and friends turned their backs on them.

"We eventually lost our house and moved to a squatter home along Ipoh Road," he recalls. But they never lost hope. "Soon the time came for my brother to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor. But my father couldn't afford to send him overseas. He approached a good friend for advice. But this friend turned to my brother and said, 'You can't afford to put food on your table but you want to go and study overseas.' This was the one time I knew my father felt pain the most. It caused him to shed tears."

His brother still made it overseas, opting for a cheaper option in Taiwan where he worked to support himself. At this point, the siblings and a young 12-year-old Liew pledged to do all they could as a family to see them through the hardship and to never be poor again.

The time soon arrived for Liew to pursue his studies. He was keen on medicine and approached his father to get his take on it. “My father pointed out that we already had too many doctors in the family by then. He clearly wasn’t keen on me pursuing that path. He didn’t have anything against doctors but being his favourite, he stressed that I would have to deal with sick patients all the time.”

Liew looked towards laws as an option instead for he did score fairly well in his A-Levels. In fact, his lecturer recognised this talent and encouraged him to pursue it. “I was very persistent on doing litigation law,” says Liew. But again, his father had other concerns so being the obedient child that he was, he complied and didn’t pursue it.

Fortunately, Liew also did very well in accountancy having scored As in his O-Levels and A-Levels. “My lecturer too felt that this is something I should pursue. It was said that I had the ability to understand accounting principles. As always, I went back to my father for his advice and he said that it was the best option for me to pursue.”

His father went on to stress that irrespective of the economy, an accountant’s skills will always be required. He also warned him that it would be a rather “boring” profession to pursue but the long-term benefits are his to reap.

And so, at 21, Liew left for London to start his journey in accountancy with a mere £800 in his pocket. “My father toiled hard to raise that money for me. It wasn’t sufficient to pay the course fees and so I worked three jobs for the first six months – one during the day, one at night, and one over the weekend; and saved enough to pay for my studies.”

The struggle did not stop there. He continued to work and study to raise funds. He did this by giving lectures. Three years on, it paid off when he qualified as an accountant and went to work in the field. “I noticed then that the accounting profession was somewhat mundane and boring so I decided to pursue a Master’s in Business Administration, researched in M&A (Merger and Acquisitions), and specialised in Tax Planning.”

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After having served in a local firm for 10 years, five to six years with an MNC travelling the world, and another five years running his own firm, Liew felt it was time he returned to his homeland. “I wanted to come back because I foresaw the potential it had. In the UK, the potential started to dip because the economy was not moving. And so I came back because I believe when a jar is leaking someone has to collect the leakages. It was the best time to return,” he says.

And so began his journey in Malaysia when Liew started his own firm and was submitted as a member into an international group of accountancy firms. But it turned out to be ineffective for there were no value added benefits to what they already do.

“9 January 2010 was when I decided to set up McMillan Woods Global in London. And within three years, we grew to a fairly large network size,” says Liew. He subscribes to the belief that the technical know-how came from the experience he earned in the UK. “But none of this would have been possible without the support of my wife, Datin Kok Yul Shin. She took on all the administrative roles and was my pillar of strength then and till today.”

True to his pledge with his siblings, they are all successful in their own capacities and haven’t forgotten to help the needy too. “In remembrance of my late father, giving back to the needy has become a part of me. I can’t stress enough on the importance of charity and why it’s an absolute necessity in our society today. Everything we do today, we do it in the name of my late father. Even the monasteries we assisted are named after him.”

Unfortunately, his father did not live to see this success. “I was in London then and I flew in because he was very ill. We knew that his time had come but we couldn’t tell for sure when. Unfortunately, I had an urgent job to attend to and my siblings urged me to go back. It was a fatal mistake. As I left for the airport to return to London, it was a gloomy day. It was raining cats and dogs, and it was almost like it wasn’t allowing me to return. My dad passed on the very next day after I returned to London. I suspect he died of a broken heart. I wouldn’t say it was anyone’s fault. It wasn’t a decision taken rightly or wrongly. I was his favourite child and this is my greatest regret. I returned home immediately,” says Liew.

Eager to do his father proud, Liew has indeed done more than anyone can. It is without doubt his business – that started with a mere two people, him and his wife – has gone on to achieve great heights.

If he had a chance to relive his life, how different would it be from today? To this he says, “If I had that chance, I would live a simple life. I’m really a simple man. I need not be super rich; I just need enough to get by. If I could relive my life, I may have been a doctor, practising in a small township somewhere, own my very own little farm, which is what I’m planning towards now in fact! I have my own agriculture land in Raub. All that’s in progress now. But yes, going back to the question – I’d want to plant my own vegetables and rear my own fish. And so this land in Raub, yes it is part of living out my dream.”

Could this be an indication of retirement? “I don’t think I would ever retire. I’m a workaholic. If I don’t work, I’ll get sick,” laughs Liew at the suggestion. But can he really adapt to such a lifestyle having been a city boy all his life? “I put this to you – if you have caviar every day, when it’s good food every single day, you will want simple food.”

The new daddy of a now five-month-old girl, Liew ends our interview gushing about his daughter. “I truly believe that a child creates the greatest bond between two individuals – husband and wife. It’s a bond that can only take place between two individuals who are in love.”

It is evident; Liew is deeply in love with two of the most important girls in his life at the moment. It’s all about family, he says. In the end, they are all you have and this is why he stresses the importance of spending all spare time with them.

Does he really have all that time to do so given he travels out of the country every other week? “Nothing is insurmountable if you put your mind, body and soul into attaining it,” he says. True to his desires, Liew is a man of his words. He will get it done, if he says he will.

