



Mr Lee Wee Yong almost died from a stroke in 2013, and could barely speak or move after he awoke from a coma. Now, he can walk for short distances with the help of a walking frame, but uses a wheelchair when he goes out. He recently completed a social work degree and hopes to be a social worker. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

GenerationGrit

Living a full life after a stroke

Mr Lee Wee Yong, 26, bounced back from a near-death experience which left him unable to walk without aid. The social work graduate wants to use his experience to help others through their darkest days, in this series about millennials who inspire us with their courage and resilience.

Long road to recovery SCAN TO WATCH

<http://str.sg/weeyong>

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Mr Lee Wee Yong was a young man on the cusp of adulthood.

The rough edges of his teenage years – fighting, petty crime – had smoothed out after he was caught stealing a schoolmate’s mobile phone. Let off with a warning from the police, he decided to change his delinquent ways.

Enrolling in Nanyang Polytechnic, he earned a diploma in chemical and green technology.

He made friends who were more mature and supportive, and also helped him change for the better.

He was young, strong and active – a marathon runner, rock climber and dragon boater.

Describing himself, he said: “I’m not a person who will sit down to read a storybook.”

Things were going well.

Then in July 2013, two months shy of his 21st birthday, he almost died from a stroke. Found unconscious outside a toilet one evening in Pulau Tekong, where he was in training for national service, he had to be evacuated by helicopter to Singapore General Hospital.

There, doctors told his distraught parents – a technician and a housewife – that Mr Lee had only a 50 per cent chance of surviving the bleeding in his brain.

He had an arteriovenous malformation, an abnormal mesh of blood vessels, which had ruptured and caused a stroke.

His mother Oh Keat Hoi, 60, said in Mandarin: “The doctors also told us to be prepared that he could end up in a vegetative state.”

“I couldn’t take it at that time, but thankfully there was a miracle.”

Following the operation to remove the blood clot from his brain, Mr Lee lapsed into a coma for almost two weeks. When he awoke, he could barely speak or move. A doctor advised his parents to hire a maid to care for their son for the rest of his life.

Though he was conscious, Mr Lee seemed unaware of what was happening. It was only a few months after the collapse that his memory and awareness returned.

Comprehension hit him with a vengeance. He realised he could not stand up, much less walk.

For the next month or two, he was inconsolable. While others spent their 21st birthdays celebrating, he spent his in hospital.

“When I was discharged from hospital after six months, I locked myself at home. How could someone who was so active become reliant on

a wheelchair?” he said.

“I felt very uncomfortable when I went out and people stared at me. My future looked so bleak.”

His parents and then girlfriend kept encouraging him, telling him not to give up hope.

He still lives with his parents in their four-room Housing Board flat in Toa Payoh, although he has broken up with his girlfriend.

Slowly, the spirit that had pushed him to the finish line in endurance sports returned.

“I decided to pick myself up and stop indulging in self-pity. I felt I could get rid of all the negative thoughts and that it was not the end of the world,” he said.

“I could choose to give up and die, or to continue living, and living to the fullest. I don’t want to die as there are still many things I hope to accomplish, like having my own family in the future.”

Gradually, he regained his functions, except the ability to walk without aid. He can walk for short distances with the help of a walking frame but uses a wheelchair when he goes out. Still, he is able to live independently now.

He also put his experience with adversity to use, recently completing a social work degree at Singapore University of Social Sciences.

He hopes to be a social worker, inspired after meeting one at SPD, a charity that helps those with disabilities, who went out of her way to help him. “I want to help others and let them know they are not alone in their darkness,” Mr Lee said.

“There’s always a way out and there are always people who are willing to lend a helping hand.”

He now recognises he was a lot more self-centred in the past. He was also focused on social status and having material things, thus missing out on what was truly important in life.

Mr Lee has learnt to be grateful for every little thing that people often take for granted, like the ability to eat and breathe.

“The doctors told my parents it’s a miracle I survived,” he said.

“To people with disabilities, I want to say we can’t control what happens to us. But as long as we embrace it, we can still discover the strength inside us.”

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GENERATION GRIT:

Know of a Singaporean aged 35 or below who has shown grit amid life’s adversities? E-mail us at stnewsdesk@sph.com.sg

BIG BLOW

The doctors also told us to be prepared that he could end up in a vegetative state. I couldn’t take it at that time, but thankfully there was a miracle.



MADAM OH KEAT HOI, 60, on the stroke that her son Lee Wee Yong suffered.

IN DESPAIR

When I was discharged from hospital after six months, I locked myself at home. How could someone who was so active become reliant on a wheelchair? I felt very uncomfortable when I went out and people stared at me. My future looked so bleak.



MR LEE

SOLDIER ON

I decided to pick myself up and stop indulging in self-pity... I could choose to give up and die, or to continue living, and living to the fullest.



MR LEE

FINDING STRENGTH

To people with disabilities, I want to say we can’t control what happens to us. But as long as we embrace it, we can still discover the strength inside us.



MR LEE