

Legitimate hustler

Making life decisions based on how much you can give back to society is the way to succeed in life, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**

On Season 1 of *The Apprentice Asia* hosted by Tan Sri Tony Fernandes, one of the final challenges for the contestants was to organise a charity fundraiser for AirAsia Foundation. The then 27-year-old Jonathan Allen Yabut chose to help raise funds for a social enterprise called Rags2Riches, an organisation that creates fashion and home accessories from disposed items. Many questioned this decision; in fact, the chatter on social media was that he had made an error in his decision. By making an "emotional decision", there was a possibility that he had committed professional suicide. As it turned out, Jonathan, a University of Philippines graduate, was successful and ended up being hired triumphing over Singaporean lawyer, Andrea Loh.

In his newly published book, *Grit To Great*, the 29-year-old chronicles his journey to this point in life. An awareness of his story also gives an idea of the experiences, influences and beliefs that have shaped this man and made him who he is.

"Rags2Riches is an organisation that creates fashion and home accessories from rubbish," explains this dynamic young man. "There is a place in Manila called Smokey Mountain. It's a heap of trash in the city. The people in this organisation will use some of the material there and up-cycle them." Up-cycle, explains the Economics graduate, is taking what others call rubbish and recycling them into something glamorous.

"I identify with all this because I came from a difficult background," says this eldest of three children.

"My hometown is in Malinao in Aklan Province but my parents migrated to Manila for a better life." Describing his mother as an Asian Tiger Mum, he adds: "My mother is a nurse and my father, an engineer. They wanted to send us to good schools and we — my brother, Jed, and I — had to get scholarships because we could not afford the tuition fees."

Getting a scholarship was one thing, but keeping it was another struggle altogether. "I had to have good grades all the time," confides Jonathan. "If my grades went from first honours to second honours, my parents would have to pay 25 per cent of the fees the next year. If I attained third class honours, they would have to pay 50 per cent of the fees. So, my brother and I were always first class honours."

Pausing to catch his breath, he says: "I remember the junior prom when everyone else came in cars and I had to take a taxi. That was hard. Also, many times, they could eat in the canteen, while I had to bring food from home. I mean, eating on styrofoam was far better than from a Tupperware with proper cutlery. It meant that they had money to buy food and I couldn't." That said, Jonathan does admit that this sense of shame was somewhat self-imposed because his friends were quite willing to mingle with him.

Still, circumstances became even more trying for the family when Jonathan was about 15 years old as his father lost his job. That, period however, was when Jonathan discovered a new way of making money: "I always liked debating and I realised that if I won competitions, I could win money. That first time I won a competition, I won about RM1,000 and gave all of that to my parents. After that, I became a legitimate hustler and made sure I was able to join every competition."

An added bonus for Jonathan was the confidence he gained. Smiling,

he adds: "You know, when we finally had a car, my father was so proud. I remember how we went to a restaurant because it was nice to eat there, not because we needed to eat."

Just when things were going well, another set of misfortunes befell the family. When Jonathan was in college (where he studied Economics with a major in Psychology) he developed a cyst on his chest.

"When we investigated it, we were told by the doctor that I had an 85 per cent chance of developing cancer. I was so afraid that I even told my friends which song to play at my funeral. But, thank God, it was a benign cyst. That experience, however, was my 'Ah-ha' moment and I decided that I wasn't going to wait for anything. I mean you could be laughing today and not breathing tomorrow."

At about the same time, he started reading a plethora of books such as *Start Something That Matters* by Blake Mycoskie.

The one that he singles out is the work of Dr Angela Duckworth. "I learnt that what makes people successful is not their EQ or IQ. It's that when they want something so bad, they will do everything possible to get it."

There is, however, one crucial element in this man's quest for success: His extraordinary faith.

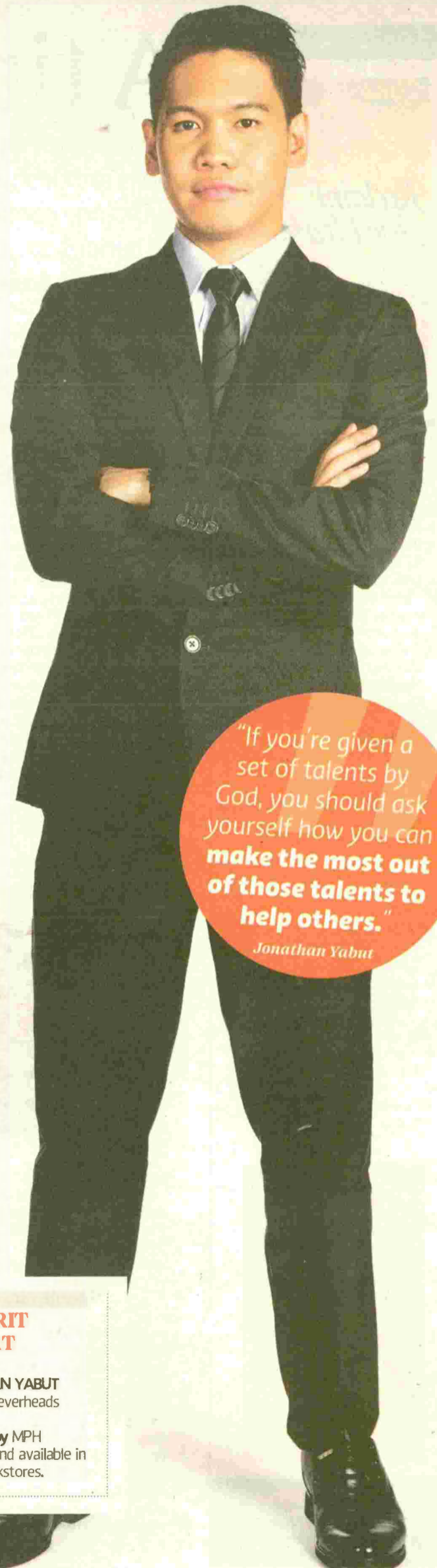
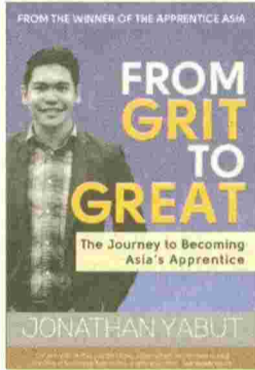
"I am Catholic and since my cancer scare, I've become even more religious. But it's not just about having the faith alone, you know. I believe that if you're given a set of talents by God, you should ask yourself how you can make the most out of those talents to help others."

Sighing deeply, he says: "People think all this success happened overnight. Sure, being on *The Apprentice* propelled me to this greatness. But it took years and years of hard work to get to the stage where I could even be part of *The Apprentice*. Sometimes I look at others my own age and they seem to think that things happen overnight. But success doesn't come overnight. It takes a lot of work. No one should ever underestimate the power of preparation."

And what is Jonathan preparing for next?

Unabashed, he says: "The situation in the Philippines sometimes overwhelms me. Filipinos deserve better. So, my 15-year plan is to work towards helping them. One day, I would like to become the secretary general of Asean or even president."

He is so sure of this that it's even printed on the dust jacket of his book. Having heard his story, there is a little doubt that this focused and very driven man may well achieve all his dreams.



"If you're given a set of talents by God, you should ask yourself how you can make the most out of those talents to help others."

Jonathan Yabut

FROM GRIT TO GREAT

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Jonathan (left) and his family.

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