

LIFE &  
TIMES

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# PU SE

## Calvin's choice

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A QUEEN ELIZABETH II AWARD

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# AN UNSCRIPTED LIFE

Following his heart has led a young man to transform the lives of young Malaysians, and getting honoured by the Queen of England, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**"I**T is impossible to draw a parallel between the EU and Asean. We don't have a common currency and there is no parliament." This is a mature opinion for one as young as Calvin Woo Yoong Shen.

The 21-year-old native of Muar, Johor and I are in the midst of discussing the recent political upheaval in Europe and, in particular, the issue of Brexit. Still, the date of this referendum, June 23, isn't one Woo will easily forget. It is the same day he received an award from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace, London.

The first Malaysian recipient of the Queen's Young Leaders Award, Woo is one of 60 young people from across the Commonwealth recognised and celebrated for taking the lead in their communities and using their skills to transform lives. The work he does hinges on his

belief that anyone, especially the young, can develop their talent when the right opportunity is presented to them.

## ROAD LESS TAKEN

How, though, does one who has completed his tertiary education only last year, assess, formulate and articulate such complex ideas? His answer is simple yet cryptic: "I refuse to accept a scripted life."

To explain what he means, Woo begins with a story from when he was a boy. As though he's revealing a painful secret, he takes a deep breath and says that he was once called up by his Science teacher for achieving "only 78 marks" in an exam. This was two marks off an 'A'. He then recites the teacher's words, now seared into his psyche: "She told me, 'You're not going to make it in life.' I was only 10 years old, but that had a huge impact on me."

This spurred young Woo to study harder and in his UPSR exams, he achieved straight As.

After the exam, his father, a banker who decided to become an English language teacher, asked him a question that was simple, but difficult for Woo to answer or define: "Are you really happy?"

"I don't want to follow others," was his reply. "I don't want to be punished for failing or made to feel stupid for trying new things either."

## PICKING HIMSELF UP

Believing that there were greener pastures on the other side of the causeway, Woo applied for an Asean scholarship in Singapore. When he received word that he was not selected for the interview, this devout Christian became somewhat melodramatic. He burnt all the brochures for this programme.

Keeping in mind the verse from the Bible, "Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead", he adds in a prophetic tone: "It's how we pick ourselves up after we fail that's important."

Open to other options, Woo applied to join Maktab Rendah Sains Mara in Mersing. When people suggested he was "gila" (mad) for choosing the school, on account of being one of the few Chinese students there, Woo's response was: "I will go 'gila' if I stay [in Muar]."

Boarding school turned out to be the best time of his life.

The skills he developed during these formative years included debating. "You know, when we debate, we're allowed to speak for

seven minutes. My first time, I could only speak for 30 seconds."

His teacher identified and recognised his passion and encouraged him. With lessons in voice projection, simulating actual debating sessions, Woo overcame his fear of public speaking and became a champion debater.

This fan of the writer Ernest Hemingway makes the distinction between skill sets that are transferable (such as the ones his teacher shared with him) and those that aren't. The latter involves being a go-getter, having a strong interest in a subject matter and working hard, all of which characterise Woo's approach to achieving success. For emphasis, he says: "I have this childlike naivety and hunger to learn. All the time!"

Still, when it came time to appear for his exams, illness befell Woo. He had dengue fever and was forced to return to Muar and told his mother he wouldn't be able to continue with the SPM examinations. "She told me to surrender to God. I went into the exam hall and just poured out what I knew from memory," he elaborates. To his surprise (and relief), he scored straight As in this exam as well.

## FOLLOWING HIS HEART

"Once again, my parents allowed me to follow my passion," says Woo. "My Dad told me to pursue excellence and money will follow. They created the environment for me to pursue my passions."

Taking a deep breath, he warns. "Passion alone is not enough. Passion is the fuel that helps people overcome challenges that will come in their way. Pursuing passion alone is dangerous. You still need to be realistic about what you can achieve."

Woo turned his back on a career in medicine, law or engineering and pursued a diploma course in English Education at University Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

Why this focus on education, though? Leaning forward from his seat, Woo recalls a memory from 15 years ago. His father was tutoring a shy and naughty boy. The son of a mechanic, this boy studied hard and transformed into a confident young man. "I was only 7 or 8 years old," he explains, "but seeing what happened to him was the moment I realised that education is a form of development and self-discovery."

This realisation is the key to what propels Woo's work since he graduated last June and subsequently became the head of programmes at Strategic Transformation via Education Development (Sastra).

This organisation is a social enterprise which he describes as "business with compassion" with the aim of improving education and reducing poverty in the country. He was also the chief co-ordinator of a National Unity Conference in 2015 for young leaders.

During what Woo describes as "a sabbatical", he became an academic Fellow

Woo with his award.  
PICTURE BY AMIRUDDIN



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Woo's proudest moment as a Malaysian was when HM Queen Elizabeth II awarded him The Queen's Young Leaders Award in London. PICTURE COURTESY OF BRITISH CEREMONIAL ART.



Woo met the likes of Phillip Schofield, Sir John Major and David Beckham during the ceremony.

on Social Entrepreneurship and Economic Development under the US State Department Young South East Asian Initiative at the University of Connecticut. Upon his return, Woo stumbled upon the entry requirements for the Queen's Young Leaders Award and decided to apply.

**MIRRORING SUCCESS**

Smiling from ear to ear, he recounts the events of June 23: "I was so nervous. With all those mirrors around us, I kept practising how to bow before Her Majesty The Queen. And when the Master of the Household announced my name and said, 'Malaysia', it hit me that this was really happening."

During his stay in the UK, Woo was fortunate to take part in five days of

high-level engagements which included visiting projects that are changing the lives of vulnerable people in the UK. One such project is the work being done at Represente Radio in Brixton. Although one of the presenters left an indelible mark on Woo, he refuses to name this presenter for fear of any residual stigma which may be attached to him and says: "He was what's called an 'at risk' person. He was homeless at one point."

Through this community-based project, the presenter was able to get off the streets and gain some stability in his life.

For the foreseeable future, Woo plans to be busy working on the organisation that he co-founded called NexGen Impact ([www.nexgenimpact.com](http://www.nexgenimpact.com)). He wants to help develop the professional capabilities of millennials in Malaysia and match their talent with suitable organisations.

"People complain that the millennials are lazy, incompetent, entitled and self-absorbed," shares Woo. This is not true. Instead, he believes that millennials actually lack access to practical professional development opportunities. Such opportunities, he believes, involves allowing the young who come to him to explore their passions.

"Our present education system," he explains, "is not conducive to allowing people to explore. We compress their development during school, college and university. They are not given any time to explore their talents. So, once they come out from university, they don't know what to do. They only make their mistakes after university. This means that when the time comes, they are not ready for the workforce and consequently have difficulty gaining quality employment."

Ultimately, Woo's belief can be summed in the following way: "I believe that rather than whining and complaining about the state of our education system and everything else, we should do something about it."



**GH is usually not pronounced when it comes after a vowel**  
(but you still need to spell it to win our spelling challenge)

**Examples of silent 'GH':**

Daughter, thought, drought, light, might, right, fight...

Just because you don't hear them doesn't mean you can ignore them. If you know the rules, you've won half the battle. Come and register for the RHB NST National Spell-It-Right (SIR) Challenge and stand a chance to win more than **RM250,000** worth of prizes. Only the top 100 best spellers will compete in the state challenge. Get the letters right and claim your title as national champion.

For more information, please visit [www.sir.nstp.com.my](http://www.sir.nstp.com.my) or call us at 03-2056 9942 (Mon-Fri, 10am - 5pm)

DATE	STATE	VENUE
13 & 14 May 2016	Kedah	Village Mall, Sg. Petani, Kedah
14 & 15 May 2016	Penang	1st Avenue, Georgetown, Pulau Pinang
23 & 24 July 2016	Negeri Sembilan	Seremban Prima, Seremban Negeri Sembilan
	Perak	Ipoh Parade, Ipoh, Perak
29 & 30 July 2016	Johor	Berjaya Waterfront Mall, Johor Bahru, Johor
30 & 31 July 2016	Melaka	Mahkota Parade, Melaka
5 & 6 August 2016	Kelantan	KB Mall, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
	Terengganu	Permai Inn, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu
13 & 14 August 2016	Selangor	Tropicana City Mall, Petaling Jaya Selangor
	Sabah	Sunja Sabah, Sabah
20 & 21 August 2016	Sarawak	Hills Shopping Mall, Kuching Sarawak
	Pahang	Kuantan Parade, Kuantan
27 & 28 August 2016	Kuala Lumpur	Berjaya Times Square, Kuala Lumpur
	Perlis	Dewan SJK (C) Khong Aik, Kangar Perlis

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