

CAMPUS LIFE

A world of opportunity

Silicon Valley has the best ecosystem for startups to flourish, says NUS student **LEE MINXUAN**

GREAT cities have big aspirations. You feel it just by walking around in one. The people, their visions, the communities and their ambitions all send you a message in a hundred different subtle ways.

You feel driven to strive harder, and to show that you are in control of your own future. Similar to Singapore, Silicon Valley in the United States is a great city – but with a very different ambition.

Having witnessed the lack of financial literacy in our world today, I am building a startup called Building Moolah together with a group of fellow youths, creating a Web-based tool for both parents and their children to engage in the financial education process together.

Imagine if children could learn how to save, manage and grow their money in a fun and interactive online world. Instead of playing mindlessly for virtual points, our selling point is to use game mechanics to enable children to earn real money from smart financial decisions.

We are in our early stages of development. In traditional methods, engineers would build a product for years in stealth mode and cross their fingers for a spectacular launch. In a slumping economy, however, reducing the risks and capital burn are critical to a startup's survival.

The new breed of startups are practising a lean model of rapid iteration, constantly learning about their customers and what they will pay, then tailoring their products as such.

Our professor Steve Blank put it simply: "In a startup, no facts exist inside the building, only opinions."

The key is to then constantly check your assumptions against reality to know your vision is not a delusion. We go so far as to bring the customer into some of our meetings, a concept that has received good feedback so far.

This is the final piece of a four-part series of articles contributed by NUS Business School students who have gone overseas as part of their overall education and global orientation.

Building Moolah has been an exhilarating experience. We have assembled a board of exceptional advisers and some individuals have shown interest in investing in our company.

All this was made possible by the NUS Overseas College (NOC) programme. We take classes at Stanford University taught by professors who are themselves serial entrepreneurs and investors. They bring insights, not from textbooks, but startup war stories and lessons from their wealth of experience.

They invite thought leaders as guest speakers who give us current observation and trends on where the future is heading. They warn us that getting any grade above a "B" meant we were neglecting other aspects of our life. Not to be taken literally, but I could not agree more with the essence of that statement.

Demystifying the magic

A larger part of our stint is the opportunity to work in a Silicon Valley startup. My days are spent doing product marketing and business development at Qik, the leader in mobile video live-streaming technology.

I explore and research unique business models, attend events and tradeshows, and design our product to focus on providing the best user experience possible, with cutting-edge mobile technology. Listening becomes the new marketing.

It is no secret that Silicon Valley provides the best support ecosystem for startups to grow. After getting my hands dirty, I finally demystified the magic.

Visionaries and technologists converge on this 50km-long strip to participate in conversations and collaborations that could change the world. Bright people are naturally drawn to one another and world-class universities play their part in attracting the best talent.

They brew groundbreaking ideas and transfer technologies from in-lab research to the commercial playground. Stanford University has spin-off technologies that account for US\$100 billion – approximately half of Silicon Valley's revenue – and enjoy royalties from the licensing of intellectual property.

We also know the role that venture capitalists (VCs) play in the startup equation. But what most people overlook are angel investors who are less well-known.

The difference is that VCs invest others' money while angels invest their own. And it makes a tremendous amount of difference.



Ms Lee: *I have discovered that the true essence of business is really a venue for personal expression and artistry*

The most successful startups are likely to be the most risky in the beginning, precisely the kind of investments VCs avoid. Sequoia and Klenier Perkins invested in Google when it was already a success with a pre-money valuation of US\$75 million.

It took angel investors Bechtolsheim and Cheriton to find the diamond in the rough. The canonical startup has always been funded by angels. They take a personal interest in nurturing the startup, its founders, and give valuable advice because they were once startup founders themselves.

I was also overwhelmed by how the entire service provider industry was designed for the growth of startups. Attorneys defer their legal payments until your first round of financing.

Real estate agents help entrepreneurs find small offices at a meagre commission, in the hope that he would soon require a 100,000 sq ft building. When you have an entire ecosystem vested and rooting in an entrepreneur's success, sometimes taking no risk becomes the biggest risk of all.

This has created a culture of mentorship and reciprocity which has been immensely inspiring as an entrepreneur. I have met altruistic leaders who have been so forthcoming

with their advice and network, and who only want to add value to my ideas.

It has then empowered me to stand for something larger than myself and dedicate my life towards a greater purpose. At this time, I have learnt to stop navigating life merely as a consumer looking for my next fix, but to actively contribute to solutions of the world. We joke that an entrepreneur is someone who wants to avoid eight hours of work but still chooses to put in a 20-hour day.

But why not, if you redefine your work as something that enables you to learn, feel, change, and grow everyday?

I have discovered that the true essence of business is really a venue for personal expression and artistry, and at its heart is a canvas rather than a spreadsheet. A time comes in your life where you have to write your own story.

I wish for all young people to start engaging in their passions, rediscover their curiosity, and fall in love with every beauty and diversity the world has to offer. Ultimately, the only limits are those we impose on our minds and we can live in the world we decide to create.

The writer is a third-year business administration student at the NUS Business School