

# Sons, let's talk

**Relatively Speaking**  
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Decisions are usually made in former Attorney-General Walter Woon's family after discussions with his wife, Janis, 52, a part-time deputy registrar at the Family Court, and their twin sons.

But there are times when there is no court of appeal against his judgment. Like in 2006 when he brought his family back to Singapore from Belgium, where he had been Singapore's ambassador for three years.

"I didn't want the boys to become strangers in their home country," says Professor Woon, 54, who is now deputy chairman at the National University of Singapore's Centre for International Law.

His sons, Adrian and Alexander, were 16 at that time and had lived abroad for almost 10 years.

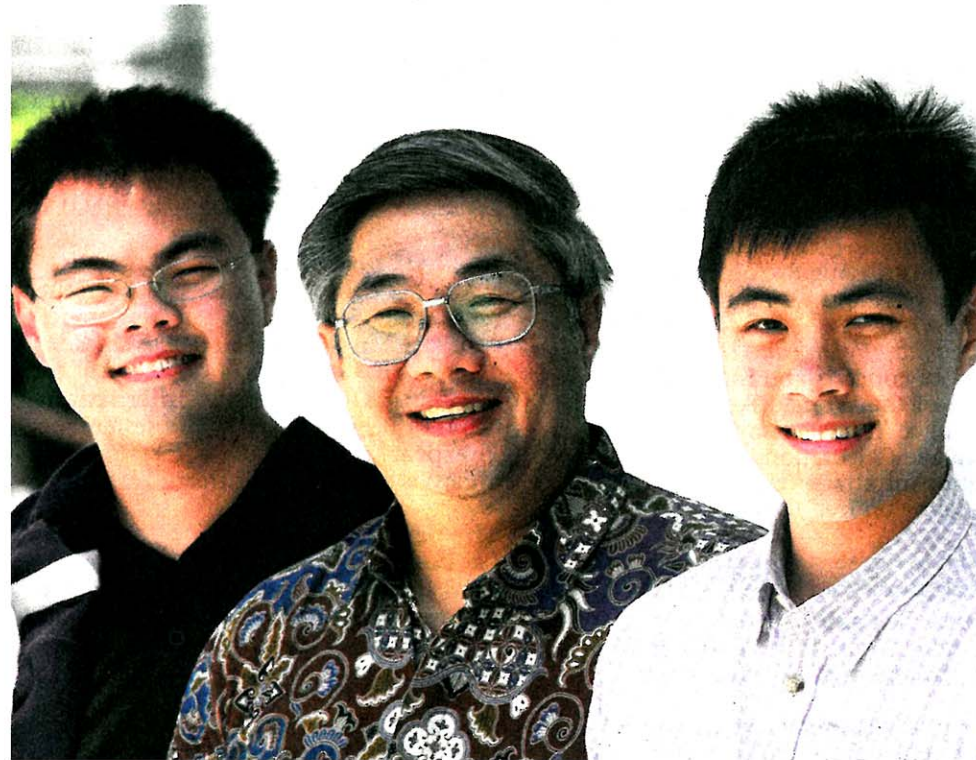
Prof Woon relocated with his family to Germany in 1997 and to Belgium in 2003, when he was appointed Singapore's ambassador to those countries.

His decision to return the family to their roots has turned out well despite Adrian's initial apprehension about the education system in Singapore after he had heard "horror stories" about the obsession with achievements and results.

Reality turned out to be far less scary for the boys.

In fact, as Prof Woon says: "Coming back to study in a junior college here stretched them. Over here, the teachers bothered to push them so they could reach their limits."

Now 20, Adrian and Alexander are reading law at their father's alma mater, University of Cambridge, on Overseas Merit



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The career path chosen by former Attorney-General Walter Woon has allowed him to spend more time with twin sons Alexander (left) and Adrian.

Scholarships awarded by the Public Service Commission.

Alexander, the younger twin by 10 minutes, is a President's Scholar.

#### What is your father like at home?

**Adrian:** Although he is always busy, he makes it a point to spend as much time with us as possible. He chose a career where he could spend time with us. He had told us before that had he gone into private practice, he would never have been able to come home early.

**Alexander:** He has always been reasonable and would always explain why we should do certain things. I am grateful for that.

#### What is your parenting style?

**Prof Woon:** I don't really have a style. I talk to my boys very often and we spend time doing things together.

**Alexander:** We talk about everything – law, politics and history. We learn so much just by talking to him.

#### Who disciplines the boys at home?

**Prof Woon:** I come in as a last resort when they fight between themselves or over things like the computer or televi-

sion. But I've never used a cane because if you don't feel the pain when you are using that, you may inadvertently be more heavy-handed with the punishment.

I used my palm to smack them when they were very young, mostly because they were bickering with each other.

**Alexander:** Our maternal grandma gets the first cut because she was the one who took care of us when we were young.

**Prof Woon:** It was mainly the deprivation of privileges such as watching TV or playing video games whenever they had a conflict with each other.

#### Prof Woon, would you have been disappointed if your sons did not follow in your footsteps and study law?

**Prof Woon:** Not at all. I would have been happy to let them do what they wanted. They are sensible enough to make these decisions.

Alex always knew what he wanted and that was law, while Adrian was more ambivalent.

**Adrian:** In the end, I decided that a law degree would give me the most options because it is a professional degree that allows me to go into other industries such

as banking. I like the flexibility it offers.

#### Do you turn to your father for help when you run into problems in your studies now?

**Alexander:** I prefer to solve the problems myself but it is good having my father around because I know he will always give me great advice.

**Adrian:** I turn to Dad for advice more often than Alex does. But in Cambridge, we are studying English rather than Singapore law, and in school, we take an academic approach to law. Dad has a more practical approach, so even if I rely on his advice, it will not always work.

#### Have there been occasions in the past when you were angry with your father?

**Alexander:** Not really, I never went through the rebellious phase. Also, I know whatever decisions my parents make are never arbitrary. I know things are done for a reason so I never feel a need to rebel.

**Adrian:** There have been times when there were conflicts between Alex and I over things like using the computer and my father had a judgment that favoured him. Other than that, there is nothing.

**Prof Woon:** There is no appeal against my judgment (*laughs*).

#### In what ways do you hope to emulate your father?

**Adrian:** It would be his commitment to the family and the way he balances work and personal matters. It has never been the case that the family comes in second.

**Alexander:** My father has always done things based on his principles and convictions. This is something that is easy to do only in theory and I hope when I have to make decisions in the future, I can be like him.

#### If the father-son roles were reversed, would you do anything differently?

**Prof Woon:** That is impossible to say. They spark off each other and I enjoy that. They were very obedient boys who never gave me any trouble. In school, they have always had good grades, so I didn't really have cause for concern.

**Alexander:** There were times in the past when I did not persevere enough in certain things, like taekwondo. I took lessons for only half a year. Perhaps I would have made me do it for longer.

**Adrian:** Nothing. I think my father has a very good and balanced approach to bringing us up.