No power at home, so he studied in void deck

Honours grad also showered at public pool as family couldn’t pay utilities bill

"I remember the power and water cuts vividly. When I came back after school, I opened the fridge and it was dark inside. I turned the tap and there was no water."

— Mr Jonathan Yew (left with his father, Mr Yew Yong Siau)

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THe school of hard knocks is a phrase often used. For Mr Jonathan Yew, 25, it sums up his life.

Growing up in a three-room flat in Woodlands, the future teacher often took his books out to the void deck and studied there past midnight, avoiding the curious stares of his neighbours.

He had to do this because the electricity supply to his home had been cut off due to unpaid utility bills — his father was facing financial difficulties, his mother had died when he was five.

Frequent water cuts also meant that Mr Yew and his younger brother would head to the nearby public swimming complex for a shower.

Last Thursday, the Bio sciences graduate at the NUS Faculty of Science graduated with a second-class upper honours degree. Mr Yew, a head Ministry of Education teaching scholar, described his experience growing up with the utility cuts, among other things.

When the power in his house was cut during his O-level and A-level exams, he thought he had run out of luck again.

Mr Yew said with a chuckle: "Thinking back, it was really funny. I was trying so hard to change my life through education, but each time, a blackout would happen."

"It sounds very dramatic, but life seems to get you during the most crucial moments."

Mr Yew said the power cut during his O-level exams lasted a month, while the one during his A-levels lasted three weeks.

He recalled: "I remember the power and water cuts (during O levels) vividly. When I came back after school, I opened the fridge and it was dark inside. I turned the tap and there was no water."

Resourceful

Together with his younger brother, Joshua, who is 23 this year, a resourceful Mr Yew negotiated the nearest swimming complex, paid the entrance fee of $50, and swam there for two months.

"I remember my Secretary 4 teacher asking me why I was so tanned all of a sudden."

"It was because my brother and I went swimming every afternoon before hitting the shower, since we already paid 50 cents to enter, why not go for a swim first?"

To wash their school uniforms, Mr Yew would fill 1-5 litre bottles with water from the coffee shop near their flat.

When it got hot at night, the family slept in the living room, which was cooler.

Mr Yew said: "We didn't have furniture in the living room so we could spread our mattresses there. It felt like I was camping with my dad and brother."

His father, Mr Yew Yong Siau, 57, did several odd jobs when the obligations were young. His monthly income was less than a thousand dollars then.

Mr Yew's mother had died from liver cancer when he was five.

Mr Yew said: "It was very hard for my dad to raise us single-handedly. When I woke up at six in the morning for school, he would be out of the house already."

His father took on many jobs, including washing dishes at a hawkers centre and being a dispatch driver.

The young Mr Yew was undaunted.

Throughout his secondary school days, Mr Yew worked at McDonald's from 6pm to 8pm every day, earning $2.80 an hour.

His efforts to "study hard and make good" paid off eventually. He emerged as the top student at Pioneer Junior College with four straight As in 2004 and went on to NUS.

"Life is better for the Yew family now."

Mr Yew used some of his scholarship money to buy furniture to spruce up their three-room flat at Ang Mo Kio. And his father now has a steady income of $1,500 as a security guard.

Talking about his future career as a teacher, Mr Yew said: "Based on my childhood, there are lots of things I want to share with my students.

"I hope to motivate them by saying that if I can do it, they can do it, too. They can emerge victorious if they work hard.

"As the eldest brother, Mr Yew also played "part-time" maths to younger brother Joshua."

He said: "I always did all the housework and cooking as I wanted my younger brother to have more time to study."

For hands, Mr Yew would cook a simple meal of instant noodles or egg with rice. Sometimes, when there was nothing to eat, the two brothers would just drink lots of water to fill up their stomachs.

Joshua, who is studying chemical engineering at Singapore Polytechnic, said: "I look up to my brother as an example of the kind of person I want to become. I'm grateful for the attention and love he has given me."

"My brother has always been there for me and I feel blessed to have him in my life."

"Mr Yew clearly remembers how difficult it was to buy a computer."

He is still extremely grateful to his father who bought him a computer for $2,000 when he was 14.

Mr Yew said: "As a little boy then, I was embarrassed to tell the teacher that I had financial problems and didn't have a computer at home."

"All my classmates were very IT-savvy while I didn't even know what MSN was."

Mr Yew said his father gave them everything he could.

"He elaborated: "To save money, my dad would buy one packet of rice for my brother and I. He would then hide it in a corner by himself to eat broad."

"When we were young, we didn't appreciate his efforts. But now, I want to say a big thank you to my dad for working so hard to raise us."