You might say it was a life he was born into. For the first six months of his life, Pericles Lewis lived amid the buzz of communal activity in a cooperative-style student residence at Rochdale College (now defunct), when his father was a graduate student.

It might explain, on some level, why the inaugural President of the Yale-NUS College felt a tad lonely and disconnected during his undergraduate days at McGill University, when he stayed off campus in a rented apartment.

So finding himself back in communal living arrangements as a postgraduate student at Stanford was like a little piece of heaven. “I remember spending a lot of time playing chess with different people, a friend from India, another from Hungary ... you get to know people from all parts of the world. That was a great experience,” Professor Lewis, now 43, says happily.

Besides sharing chores like cooking and washing, he was also in charge of organising activities to bring everyone in the house of 30 students together. Some of the deep friendships he made have lasted till today. One was forged over washing dishes one night — Sheila is now his wife.

And this scenario of living and learning within a community is what Prof Lewis hopes to replicate, when the first batch of 150 Yale-NUS students come on board next August.

Student life will be one of his priorities in the months of preparation ahead, he says. “Too many kids are cut off during their university years and do not develop to their full potential ... We are social beings and to develop in a community is very important.”

To that end, all Yale-NUS undergraduates will live together in the National University of Singapore’s UTown before the official campus is ready in 2015, learning “how to live with people for 24 hours a day”.

The upcoming campus will include common spaces such as rooftop gardens for students to mingle. In the classrooms, Prof Lewis has requested for rectangular or oval tables instead of square ones, so that more people can sit together for discussions.

While those admitted to the college will be highly-accomplished students, Prof Lewis points out that “you don’t have to be the best in the room at everything”. Rather, “you learn from other people who have different talents from yours; you learn to see the world a bit differently”.

Conversing over teatime at The St Regis Singapore, he looks worn out from back-to-back meetings and jetlag, on a visit here to prepare for the new college’s opening. But he is candid and obliging, breaking into hearty laughter from time to time as he talks about the experiences that have shaped him.

It has been a month since Prof Lewis took the reins of the first liberal arts
A people president

He has said that he hopes to provide a liberal arts and science education for the 21st century — giving students the breadth of knowledge to ask questions in any discipline, and the rigorous training to go deep into a particular field.

He took on this role cognisant of the opposition of some Yale colleagues who are concerned about political freedom here.

He has pledged that students will be free to express their views, although “it is not the job of an educational institution to tell other people what to think politically” but to encourage dialogue.

Prior to this career move, Prof Lewis spent 14 years teaching (as a don of English and Comparative Literature) and fulfilling students and faculty recruitment duties at Yale — a place he wistfully describes as “very wonderful”. “My friends could never imagine why I would want to ever leave.”

But having helped in the initial planning of the college two years back, he felt ready to take on a new challenge in academia just as the search for a president was on.

CAUGHT THE ASIA BUG

There was the opportunity to shape a brand-new kind of undergraduate programme in the heart of Asia, balancing a mix of Eastern and Western ideas. All this sounded very exciting, he says.

He has always been drawn to the energy of Asia too. He has travelled the region, including visiting Singapore for the first time 18 years ago after a trip to India, and recalls the dynamism he felt in places undergoing rapid changes.

“One of the things I like about Asian cultures in general is the emphasis on the collective and the community,” in contrast to the Western focus on the individual, he says.

Asian influences are present in his life in other, more intimate ways.

His wife, who is of Indian descent, was raised in Texas after her parents migrated from Punjab. Their two children were given Asian names — Siddhartha and Maya — and while they do not speak any South Asian languages, they often ask their maternal grandparents about life in India.

LITERARY PASSION

By his own admission, Prof Lewis — who holds American and Canadian citizenship — is an extrovert who enjoys meeting and talking to new people.

He credits this to having been raised by parents who were keen believers of living in close-knit communities, as well as to having spent most of his adult life in the small New Haven community where Yale is situated. His parents, a lawyer and a social worker, involved themselves in community work and often emphasised the need to give back.

So when his turn at fatherhood came, he served on the management board of his children’s pre-school. The role meant discussing the school’s operations, to pulling clean-up duty with other parents.

Growing up, his literary passion was stoked by Dad who “always recited poems by heart to us” (Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ is forever ingrained in memory). And so, despite his father’s initial dreams of a lawyer’s path for him, he plunged into reading and writing prolifically as a teenager, and went on to learn French, Italian and German so as to read those cultures’ great literary works in their original language.
A people president

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JUDGING CHARACTER

As a teacher at Yale, he combined his two loves of people and literature. He also got involved in faculty and student recruitment, experience that has put him in good stead now as the new Singapore campus ramps up faculty recruitment.

Thus far, Prof Lewis and his committee have identified about 40 faculty members from some 2,300 applicants, with room for another 10.

On being a judge of character, he says: “The best novelists don’t tell you everything up front. They take a while to tell a story. I think that is true when you are interacting with people. You see someone and you think you know them, but you have to watch them over time to see how they develop.”

His kids and wife are looking forward to the new adventure, already packing for the big move to Singapore — where, naturally, they will all stay on campus, he says.

For him, the anticipation is building — “the sense that what you are doing is going to help shape something that, hopefully, will be around for a very long time.

“A sense that what you are doing really matters.”