There was a time when sleeping on the streets almost became a reality for Andrew Heng and his family. Once from a well-to-do family, life took a turn for the worse when his father’s business folded during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

“By then, my dad was in his late 50s, and unlike today, there wasn’t any rehiring policies or reemployment of older workers,” said the second year student from the NUS Business School.

Over the next 10 years, the family downgraded the rental flat from three rooms to one room, living day to day. Heng himself started working from age 14. Up till recently, he was working part-time in order to make ends meet and to foot his father’s medical bills, but he stopped as he felt that he needed to concentrate more on his studies. As the financial stress piled up, it was thus with no small measure of surprise and joy when he found out that he had been awarded the Peh Boon Poh Bursary.

Heng is one of the 45 undergraduates who received a bursary at the NUS Business School Undergraduate Bursary Award 2011 held at the NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House on October 25. The bursary was initiated by Mr. Peh Chin Hua two years ago. To date, S$540,000 has been raised and 110 students from the NUS Business School have benefited from its disbursement.

One of the biggest contributors of the night, Mr Robin Ng Chee Chuan, also the Chairman of the Undergraduate Bursary Fundraising Project 2011, gave a sum of S$45,000. This special bursary was named the Ng Ah Hing Memorial Bursary in memory of his late father. In his speech, Ng told of how his father was forced to leave China in search of a better life in Singapore. Without any proper education, life was hard, but he eventually found employment as a taxi driver.

Realizing the importance of education, the older Ng had stepped forward with a donation amounting to one week’s salary for the building of Nanyang Technological University (then known as Nanyang University). Just as he has followed in his father’s footsteps to give, Ng hopes that the beneficiaries of this night’s awards would in turn find ways to give back to the community. Also present was Mrs. Anastasia Liew, Managing Director of Bengawan Solo Pte Ltd, who also made a donation of S$45,000 under the Bengawan Solo Bursary.

In attendance was Associate Professor Hum Sin Hoon, the Vice-Dean of Undergraduate Studies, NUS Business School, who expressed much appreciation toward the donors. “As much as their parents have
big dreams for them, we also have big dreams for them. We want them to experience their undergraduate years to the fullest, to be able to focus on their studies and participate in co-curricular programmes. I owe it to our students and to the school to communicate this clearly to all the donors—that your work in this dimension is of tremendous value to us,” he said.

Halfway through the dinner, the NUS String Quartet delivered a live performance, followed by the bursary award ceremony. Although the bursaries are not extravagant in value, they certainly help ease the tight living conditions of the beneficiaries. In her thank you speech, recipient of the Ng Ah Hing Memorial Bursary, Syahirah Aiman Binte Abbas who comes from a family of eight, recounted how she and her siblings would cover each other’s expenses out of their own Hari Raya savings whenever money ran short—and with the $1,000 income her father draws monthly, it often did. She herself would often forego social meetings in order to save money. Through a learning trip to Bangalore, she saw how children lived with passion and zeal despite having so little, and said that while she does not have the means now, she will lend a helping hand to the less fortunate in future.

As for final year accounting student Alicia You Hongyu, recipient of the Sentek Marine Bursary, the bursary will allow her to spend less time working and more time studying. Once an active student leader, You had to give up many of her co-curricular activities to earn money giving tuition when her father lost his job last April.

“I am deeply grateful for the timely help,” she said. “The Chinese have a saying that goes, ‘delivering charcoal in snow’; this bursary is like charcoal to me. Indeed, we should never give up hope, just like my dad never gave up searching for a job. Recently, he landed an odd job. Although the income is not stable, it helps to ease our daily expenses.”

In demonstrating generosity, the donors inculcated a “pay-it-forward” mentality in their beneficiaries, as expressed by Heng, “The donation by Mr. Peh will definitely go a long way. I want to hone a life skill which will be able to get me back to where I am even if I become bankrupt in future. This is the greatest gift one can give to the next generation because it ensures their survival; I want to teach people in financial difficulty how to get out of it.”

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