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UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPING BARRIER- FREE TOILETS

EFFORTLESS TOILET -
FUNG WING CHIU

STRONGER CONVICTION THANKS TO DEPRESSION

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES ON THE PATH OF GROWTH

University students, the elderly, toilets — these things seem to be unrelated. So how did it all begin? “I was in my fourth year in 2016. One day, I told my friend: ‘It seems like we haven’t really done anything over these four years. This isn’t right.’ Coincidentally, I saw a poster outside the society room that said ‘Annual Inventor Competition’, and I was like, why not? It wouldn’t hurt even if we lost,” Chiu recounted in a daze. It all sounded like a Stephen Chow movie, funny yet passionate and full of energy.

Chiu then teamed up with four of his BME friends and signed up for the competition half-jokingly. One of his teammates was working on the EMG signals of the elderly for his graduation project and had to invite elderly people to the laboratory in PolyU to get tested. In the process, he found that seniors often have difficulty standing up after using the toilet due to a lack of strength in their legs. After a series of discussions, Chiu and his teammates decided that it was a good direction for the competition — they would develop a

toilet assistive device. When speaking of the competition, Chiu still sounded like he was not quite sure what happened. “I actually don’t know how we made it to the finals, or how we got the first place. I really don’t.”

“My whole life has been like that. It’s like I did it all by chance. I don’t really know how to describe the past twenty-odd years.”

When it came to the competition, or even his life, Chiu kept saying that his achievements were fortuitous. The 22-year-old inventor came from a grassroots background. He went to an ordinary primary school when he was a kid. When it was time to choose a secondary school, his mother picked a traditional elite school for him, and he “hit the jackpot”. During his secondary school years, Chiu studied hard, but his public exam results were just so-so; they should not have been enough for him to get into BME, but he got in “fortuitously” anyway.

Chiu kept stressing on his “fortuitousness”, saying that he was only lucky. But in fact, his willingness to try out new things was also a determining factor for his achievements. He admitted that he did not like attending lectures or studying during his university days. However, he was actively engaged in student societies. In his second year, he joined the Drama Society as a member of the stage and props crew.

“It was the best stage crew among all universities because members got trained really well.”

Sometimes, he would pull all-nighters a few times a week just to finish his work, during which he learnt a lot about carpentry and design. He would not have imagined that the knowledge he gained would come in handy in modifying toilets. It would also determine his important role in the team.

At this point, you may think that Chiu’s story is simple — just a few bored university students signing up for a competition, designing some random product, and winning. But behind the award and applause, Chiu had experienced the onerousness of life deeply, which was life-changing for him.



“ I met Chiu at PolyU on the day of the interview. Dressed in a simple outfit and looking rather reserved, he led me to the society room of the Biomedical Engineering (BME) Student Society. It had been an important part of his life over the past few years, as well as the strategic location where he and his friends devised a plan to modify toilets. They hope to develop an assistive device that can offer barrier-free access to the washroom for the elderly, thereby enhancing their self-care ability. ”



SUDDEN BOUT OF DEPRESSION

“It was around October or November in 2016, when we had just made it to the finals. I started having emotional problems and I didn’t really know why. I started to ask myself a lot of questions about life. I felt down and couldn’t think clearly. I’d be like, ‘the world is bleak’, ‘I’ll be working for somebody for my entire life after graduation’, ‘the world is meaningless’... I think I experienced some kind of mental illness. Waking up on a cloudy day would make me feel lethargic, and I wouldn’t feel like eating anything. There wasn’t even a reason. It was excruciating.” He felt first-hand the pain of depression and realised why it was so hard for regular people to understand depression.

Was it because of the stress brought by the competition? Or was it the anxiety caused by his looming graduation, or the stressful environment in Hong Kong society? Chiu could not identify the cause, nor could he explain the situation — he only knew that the problem was serious. He tried to seek help from a social worker and tried to go to church to talk it out, but it was all in vain. At last, he recovered with his own willpower after a few months. During those painful days, Chiu

trudged on with the competition and won the first place with his team in the end. This award, on the surface, looks like the turning point for Chiu and his team as a ticket to participate in Good Seed, where they succeeded again and got the funding to continue with product development. But for Chiu, his episode of emotional problems was the real turning point — before that, he did not really care about winning the competition. He only wanted to look for a stable job after graduation and lead an “ordinary” life, just like any other university student. It was only after the episode that he started to ponder what kind of person he really wanted to be.

“My attitude changed completely. I don’t want to work for somebody for my whole life after graduation, or make no contribution to society. A life like that is meaningless.”

Chiu’s tone became serious and determined. “The thing is, I just want to do something to help the people around me. It doesn’t have to be something big.” Chiu attributed his change in attitude to two things. The first one was his emotional problems, since they made him realise how lonely and painful life could



be for some people. The second one was his participation in Good Seed, which helped him understand theoretically why he should contribute to society.

“I joined a bunch of activities in Good Seed. I listened to a lot of people talk about what they had experienced, and that was really moving. It really made you understand why they started a social enterprise, and why they would put so much effort into it. I was really touched.”

Chiu wanted to dedicate himself to helping others. When such an idea grew, he started to treat his toilet assistive device seriously. He wholeheartedly wanted to launch the product so that he could help the elderly and stroke patients. However, along the way, he found out that the development process was not easy at all. There was a lot of room for

improvement, such as the stability of the product. He admitted that the product is only 30% ready, still a long way to go before it is ready for mass production. “I think I’ve kind of failed, but I don’t mind continuing with it. Or maybe, if someone wants to take it from here, I can work with them as well.” It is as though he has reached a dead end, but Chiu does not feel frustrated. This experience has already helped him grow. Going forward, he is going to find another way and open other paths in social innovation. “I don’t want to lose my passion so soon.”

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PERSONAL NAVIGATION DEVICE CHALLENGES LIMITED SENSES

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