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Driven by ambition

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NOT many people know that Lim Eng Chong has something in common with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Deputy PM Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the country's first PM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

It isn't political inclination, if that's what you're thinking, but the fact that Lim once studied in the same schools that these three illustrious men attended. He did the first five years of his secondary education at Kolej Sultan Abdul Hamid in Kedah where the PM and the late Tunku also studied, followed by Form Six in Penang Free School, which the DPM attended.

And just like these three successful men, the 49-year old Lim, although not likely to be Prime Minister, is a leader in his own right, being the president of the Henry Butcher Group in Malaysia. Henry Butcher was set up by Lim and his partners in the late 80s and has grown to become one of the country's largest property consultancy firms, conducting valuation, project marketing, estate agency and property management activities.

Hailing from a small railway town called Tokai in Kedah, Lim spent most of his formative years in the northern state, where he lived with his two younger brothers, his jewellery businessman father and teacher mother.

"I was rather playful in school, preferring to hang around outdoors rather than study," Lim admitted. Despite this carefree attitude, he had his sights on becoming an accountant, simply because he had noted that most of the "big companies" were controlled by "finance people".

"I applied to do accountancy but instead, was offered a place for Bachelor of Science in Estate Management at the National University of Singapore. I was still playful, but the course was not very difficult and it had a lot to do with economics and finance, which suited me," he recalled.

Lim said the four-year course was good training for him, as he learned everything about planning, design and structure as well as valuation and finance. He graduated with honours in 1977 and joined the Ministry of Finance's Valuation and Property Service Department for a two-year compulsory stint, after which he left to join the private sector.

However, the restless Lim was not content with just doing valuation work for the company he had joined; he was curious to find out more about the whole property development process.

"I wanted to learn how developers arrived at the decision to buy land, develop it and price the properties they built. So I joined Island and Peninsular (I&P) in Penang as the company's development manager. This involved a pay cut, but I was looking at the bigger picture, so I was willing to make the sacrifice," he revealed.

"I learned a lot from my two bosses in I&P, the late Raja Azwa bin Raja Ahmad and Datuk Wahab Maskan, (presently the chief executive officer of Golden Hope) about the real estate business. They showed me how a decision to develop is evaluated from all angles, and taught me cash flow management, how to deal with government authorities and how to determine pricing," Lim recalled.

One year into the job, the company relocated its headquarters to Kuala Lumpur. Moving to the Klang Valley opened up a wealth of choice in terms of job opportunities, and Lim left I&P to join Aik Hua Holdings Bhd, which was involved in property development, financial services and engineering works, as the general manager.

He was subsequently offered a job in IOI Corporation Bhd, where he got a taste of luxury when he was provided with a chauffeur-driven BMW for his use at the relatively young age of 35. He said he also considers himself fortunate for having had the opportunity to work under IOI head honcho Tan Sri Lee Shin Cheng.

A year later, an opportunity for Lim to start out on his own arose when British-based valuation firm Henry Butcher Group was looking for someone to start up an office in Malaysia. Not being one to refuse a challenge and chance for independence, Lim grasped at the opportunity, even though it meant giving up his chauffeured BMW for a beat-up Ford that kept breaking down! He roped in his first partner, Long Tian Chek, and started operations in 1987.

"We streamlined our work. Long took care of the valuation part and I took care of the business development, project marketing and agency," he explained.

Although it proved to be a tough start, it was not long before work came his way, thanks to his former bosses, including Lee, who recommended his firm to their friends.

"Despite the recession back then, we managed to cut a fair number of deals with foreigners interested to invest in Malaysia. For example, we helped to sell Menara Aik Hua to a Singaporean concern. We also found a buyer for the piece of land on which Menara Public Bank in Jalan Ampang now stands and did the deal for the parcel that has since been developed into Puchong Jaya," Lim revealed with satisfaction.

"One of our earlier assignments in project marketing was in the 80s for the Angkupuri condo project in Mont Kiara, which was being developed by a small company that had not ventured into condo developments before. We were able to provide our expertise in design, project implementation and marketing, and managed to sell out everything within a month," he added.

Not content to rest on their laurels, Lim and his partners set to work to fulfill their aspirations of expanding throughout the country and established their company's reputation as one of Malaysia's premier property consultancy firms. Today, with 20 offices nationwide, Lim and his team are preparing their company to face the challenges of globalisation. They are also forging ahead to export their expertise to other countries in Asia, beginning with Vietnam and China.

"One of the reasons we grew so fast is because, instead of opening branches on our own, we teamed up with the local professionals to form partnerships. This is the way we are looking at to venture into Vietnam and China," Lim explained.

He himself is spearheading this move, and is handling the expansion, business development, corporate image and corporate affairs portfolios. The Group is currently finalising arrangement with business partners in Shanghai, Beijing and Vietnam.

The Group has been busy back home, too, having embarked on a new area of business - retail consultancy.

"One of our current projects is looking at the renewal of Plaza Rakyat and turning the former airport's Terminal 3 into a lifestyle retail centre," Lim revealed.

On a personal note, the father of two starts off the day with a hearty, healthy breakfast that includes vitamins and supplements to keep him going well into the night and to maintain his youthful looks. Then he is whisked away to his numerous appointments in his chauffeur-driven black Mercedes, a far cry from the battered Ford of the old days.

He unwinds by listening to music, playing golf and spending the weekends with his wife and younger daughter (his older daughter is undertaking actuarial studies in Australia). He seeks inspiration and motivation in

business magazines and the autobiographies of successful persons.

He has been accused of being short-tempered by those he comes into contact with in the course of his work, but he laughed this off by saying: "I do get a little impatient when matters are not acted upon immediately."

Lim is mindful of the fact that he will eventually have to hand over the reins of leadership to the younger generation in the company. But he's not quite ready to take a back seat yet, as his hands are full preparing the Group to face the challenges of globalisation and expansion.